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THE LOST OBJECT OF LOVE?
THE MYSTERY OF UNPERFORMED MOURNING
IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *HOUSEKEEPING*

What haunts are not the dead,
but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.
Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok

Commenting on Albrecht Dürer's famous engraving *Melancholia I*, Drew Daniel notices that the angel's "self-propping stance expresses melancholy so baldly, so directly, so apparently, that in a sense it hardly requires explanation, only recognition" (41). Similarly to Dürer's angel, so self-evidently melancholic, *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson's debut novel, both in its tone and subject matter, is a book about melancholy. However, in the extensive critical reception *Housekeeping* has received since its publication in 1980, the term melancholy has been used as a somewhat obvious referent, a keyword that comes to the scholar's mind naturally and, as a result of its seemingly obvious appearance, is rarely put under sufficient scrutiny.¹ Thus, the present article attempts to fill the gap in the novel's criticism by investigating the nature of loss responsible for *Housekeeping*'s melancholy.

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¹ For example, Thomas Gardner's analysis of grief and loneliness in *Housekeeping* refers to the term melancholy only once. Tace Hendrick, although "diagnoses" Ruth with "the melancholy of a representation of the domestic space" (139), quickly abandons that notion, having identified the mother as the source of loss. Martha Ravits describes Ruth as "a grieving child who carries the image of the lost mother and the unresolved past into all phases of her mental and emotional life" (648), but does not connect loss to melancholy.

The narrator of *Housekeeping*, Ruth, begins her story by recollecting the founder of the family, Edmund Foster, who moves into a small town of Fingerbone, builds a house on a nearby hill, marries a local girl, fathers three daughters, and dies in a train derailment. The three daughters of Edmund and Sylvia Foster—Molly, Helen, and Sylvie—having spent “five serene, eventless years” (Robinson 13) in the company of their mother, all move out from Fingerbone within the same year. Seven and a half years later, Helen returns to the town, leaves her two daughters, Lucille and Ruth, on her mother’s porch, and commits suicide by driving her car into the same lake that consumed the train of her father. When Ruth’s grandmother dies five years later, the girls are left in the care of Sylvia’s sisters-in-law who, overburdened by the responsibility, contact Sylvie. Helen’s sister returns to Fingerbone and replaces Sylvia’s sisters-in-law as the girls’ guardian. The novel focuses on the time Ruth and Lucille spend with Sylvie and reports on the growing estrangement of the sisters. Whereas Lucille grows irritated with her aunt’s strange behavior to finally leave the house and move in with her Home Economics teacher, Ruth becomes more similar to Sylvie and, in the end, leaves Fingerbone with her to become a vagrant.

An exception to the critics’ general disinterest in the novel’s melancholy may be Tace Hendrick’s essay on Emersonian imagery in *Housekeeping*. Hendrick makes an acute observation about the “accumulation of melancholic Emersonian images of loss, erasure, and fragmentation” (138). However, when it comes to the lost object on which mourning has not conducted its work, Hendrick may be too eager in identifying the *who* as the family member closest to Ruth—her mother. “In the process, one way or another, of losing her family, Ruth learns that she is literally in a place of melancholy where the boundaries between her and the loved, dead mother are permeable; where the dead mother circulates forever in the memory of the living, and cannot be once and for all separated off, laid to rest” (Hendrick 141). Even though correct in situating Ruth in a place of excessive melancholic images and aware of the need to locate that which has been lost, Hendrick may be too keen to give an explanation, as if misled by the overabundance of images of loss she analyzes. It is impossible to deny that the loss of mother must have been a traumatic experience that is at least partially responsible for Ruth’s silence and fear of abandonment. But if the girl’s melancholy has been caused by her mother’s suicide, why does not Lucille bear the sign of Saturn? Why did Mrs. Sylvia Foster’s daughters all move out from the house

within the same year? And why is Sylvie, who chose the life of a transient, also so visibly melancholic?

Housekeeping is not direct in naming the lost object of love because, paradoxically, it is excessive in providing images of loss and abandonment. For Hendrick, it is the mother who committed suicide that functions as the lost object held responsible for Ruth's melancholy. However, by focusing on Ruth's expression of loss, Hendrick's reading of the novel disregards other members of the Foster family who bear visible signs of the malady they could not have "contracted" from Helen. In fact, by killing herself—thus, according to Hendrick's analysis, becoming the lost object of love—Helen testifies to a depression that predates her own death; her suicide, in other words, allows one to place her as a carrier, but not as the patient zero. Therefore, haunted by the loss that is not her own, Ruth seems to manifest symptoms of transgenerational haunting theorized in Abraham and Torok's work on the crypt. Her unmourned loss "takes the shape of a secret transmitted within a family or community without being stated because it is associated with repressed guilt, shame or is the result of a trauma that has not been worked through" (Berthoin 4). Consequently, in order to locate the source of *Housekeeping*'s melancholy, one must look for a signifier that predates Helen's suicide.

The main premise of Abraham and Torok's theory of transgenerational haunting calls into question the identity of the lost object of love theorized by Freud. Freud argues that "one cannot clearly see what has been lost" (284). According to him, "the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us because we cannot see what it is that absorbs him so entirely" (285). Nevertheless, in spite of the mysterious cause of the malady, Freud believes in a direct connection between the subject affected by melancholy and that which has been lost (283). Abraham and Torok propose a different explanation. For them, the melancholic acts as a cryptophore—a carrier of the secret that predates them, passed from the parent's unconscious into the child's (Abraham 173). As argued by Torok, "the 'phantom' is a formation in the dynamic unconscious that is found there not because of the subject's own repression but on account of a *direct empathy with the unconscious or the rejected psychic matter of a parental object*" (Torok 181). When read through the prism of Abraham and Torok's theory, Ruth may be viewed as a cryptophore for the mystery buried in her mother's unconscious—she has incorporated a secret that cannot be voiced, yet one that has been haunting the Foster family since Edmund's death.

The present article attempts to read Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* as a murder tale. The rules of a classical whodunit dictate that when there is a victim, there is usually a culprit. For Hendrick, the mother who committed suicide (which I take to be a form of murder) is the one who should be held responsible for Ruth's melancholy. However, by returning to the crime scene (both literally and figuratively), the present reading of the novel attempts to demonstrate that the story is a plot of three, none of whom is the mother who herself became one of the victims of an assemblage that predates her suicide. The first culprit is the grandfather, whose death, although accidental, creates a rupture in the symbolic order he initiated. The second culprit is the grandmother: her fault lies in her failure to mourn her husband's premature departure, which could mend the veil of the symbolic. And the third, probably the most treacherous villain of the story, is the house, melancholic about the lost unity with nature, unable to accept the symbolic and its arbitrary significance, and thus infecting all its inhabitants with the overabundance of black bile. Therefore, the following reading of *Housekeeping* attempts to reassemble that which the melancholic discourse of the novel covers with the manic overproduction of signs of loss and decay.

* * *

"One day my grandmother must have carried out a basket of sheets to hang in the sunlight, wearing her widow's black," Ruth narrates (Robinson 16). The grammatical structure of the sentence ("must have") suggests the unreliability of the narrator who does not have the first-hand knowledge of the event, yet the proliferation of details that follow—"two or three inches of hard old snow on the ground" (16), the warmth of the sunlight, or the sudden wind that billows the sodden sheet—together with the firm insertion of the modal "must" (Ruth could have chosen "could have" instead) seem to partially erase the border between the actual event and its textual representation. Thus, the resolution with which Ruth narrates the past may be seen as her attempt to uncover the original loss, to narrate that of which she does not know, yet is constantly aware of and influenced by. However, the passage produced by Ruth is far from unambiguous: although it seems to take place on two time levels, the transition from the past-before-the-accident to the past-after-it may be a misdirection. By mixing the chronology, Ruth may be speaking of that which she has no way of knowing—that her grandmother

did not perform her mourning, which transferred melancholy onto her daughters who, in turn, passed it on to Ruth.

The grandmother's widow's black suggests that the scene takes place after the derailment of the train in which Edmund Foster died. But a moment later Ruth awakens in her grandmother a memory of trips Sylvia and her husband used to take when Edmund was still alive.

[The wind] came down the lake, and it smelled sweetly of snow, and rankly of melting snow, and it called to mind the small, scarce, stemmy flowers that she and Edmund would walk half a day to pick, though in another day they would all be wilted. Sometimes Edmund would carry buckets and a trowel, and lift them earth and all, and bring them home to plant, and they would die.... She and Edmund would climb until they were wet with sweat.... The wind would be sour with stale snow and death and pine pitch and wildflowers. (Robinson 16)

The memory is interlaced with the modal "would" which suggests permanence, both of a ritual and the event that already took place. Repeated six times, it becomes an anchor that places Ruth's narration in the past before the accident, simultaneously stressing the inevitability of history that cannot be rewritten.

Julia Kristeva points out that "[a] repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies" (*Black Sun* 33). In Kristeva's reading of melancholy, repetition becomes a recurring sign of the rupture in reasoning, a constant reminder of an error that questions the functionality of logical sequences. The above passage from *Housekeeping* to some extent adopts this repetitive rhythm of the melancholy discourse, which may be the first suggestion of the rupture in the logical sequence. When Ruth's mantric repetition of the modal "would" intensifies, the logical sequence finally breaks, suggesting the rupture in the chronological order. "In a month those flowers would bloom. In a month all dormant life and arrested decay would begin again. In a month she would not mourn, because in that season it had never seemed to her that they were married" (Robinson 16–17). The first two sentences are firmly rooted in the past before the accident; both syntactic ("would") and semantic (flowers, dormant nature and arrested decay) markers refer to the same time level when Edmund is still alive and spring has not yet come. The third sentence, however, seems to break this referentiality, for even though the syntactic marker is preserved, the semantic one seems to have shifted to a different time level: one where Mrs. Sylvia Foster, in her

widow's black, still has not finished her mourning and is hanging the sheets in the garden. What if, however, the semantic markers create a confusion, only seemingly returning the narrative from one time level to another?

From Ruth's description of the derailment the reader learns that the accident took place in winter, for a few hours after the vanishing of the train underneath the surface of the lake, it gets covered with ice: "the membrane of ice that formed where the ice was torn looked new, glassy, and black.... By evening the lake there had sealed itself over" (8). Edmund and Sylvia took their trip in spring, and Sylvia is also spreading the sheets in spring. The "proper" sequence of events, one that would give Sylvia time to mourn her deceased husband, would start with the spring of the trip followed by the winter of the derailment, and would end with the spring of the end of mourning (either directly following the winter of the derailment—in which case the mourning would last a few months—or taking place a year after). But the confusion of syntactic and semantic markers—the flowers that would bloom belong to the past, whereas the mourning is part of the future—seems to undermine such an easy reconstruction. The modal "must have," opening Ruth's imaginary account, suggests the necessity of the work of mourning, at the same time hinting at the girl's uncertainty about whether the events she narrates took place. She "must have," but did she? What if what seems like a confusion of two time levels is only masked as such? What if Ruth's imaginary account suggests that Edmund and Sylvia took a trip also the year of the derailment, as winter receded for a while giving way to early signs of spring? In this case, a month from the trip, Edmund would be dead. In a month—the same month, the month of Edmund's death—Sylvia would not mourn.

Ruth's narrative does not suggest the end of mourning; it hints at the mourning that never took place.² However, if melancholy is the impossibility of coming to terms with loss, what is the lost object? Sylvia would not mourn not because she is incapable of accepting her husband's death, but

² Christine Caver's analysis to some extent coincides with the present reading as it considers Edmund's death a traumatic event that has marked all Foster women and provided them with the matrix for dealing with trauma. For Caver, Ruth's account of the five silent years that follow the derailment may be the symptom of buried trauma that "remains present by its very absence" (120). Sylvia does not discuss her husband's death with her daughters, which forces them to deal with the loss of their father in silence. However, Caver's reading does not seem to explain how Ruth manages to overcome her inability to speak caused by the trauma of her mother's suicide. Although aptly noticing that "she writes her family history by recording sophisticated and lyrical interior monologues yet is barely able to speak to those around her" (116), Caver seems unable to account for the source of Ruth's discourse.

because for her, life has resumed its course in which Edmund was just an interruption. For Sylvia's melancholy predates Edmund:

[S]he would feel that sharp loneliness she had felt every long evening since she was a child. It was the kind of loneliness that made clocks seem slow and loud and made voices sound like voices across water. Old women she had known, first her grandmother and then her mother, rocked on their porches in the evenings and sang sad songs, and did not wish to be spoken to. (Robinson 18)

Edmund's arrival to Fingerbone and his marriage to Sylvia covers the sense of alienation the woman inherited from her female ancestors with a structure the man was longing for: the house among mountains, removed as far as possible from the lake which becomes the constant reminder of the un-symbolizable. And while Sylvia can access, after Edmund's death, the loneliness she used to feel, her daughters are left with the house as a misplaced sign of loss. For even though Sylvia "set out upon her widowhood, and became altogether as good a widow as she had been a wife" (10), the unperformed mourning becomes a rupture in the order initiated by Edmund. Therefore, mourning in this case should not be seen as a personal act that can be left to Sylvia's choice, but a social one, the symbolic recognition of the end of Edmund's rule over his family.

"My grandfather had sometimes spoken of disappointment," Ruth confesses. "With him gone they were cut free from the troublesome possibility of success, recognition, advancement" (13). The narrator juxtaposes the (grand)father figure with the sudden vanishing of socially constructed obligations. However, the newly gained freedom is problematic, for even though there is no one to feel disappointed with the possibilities that will never bear any fruit, the cut is not decisive enough to free all Edmund's women from under the influence of his ambitions. The mourning never performed, Sylvia and Edmund's daughters are left with an empty sign: the house, the form suddenly deprived of its previous content, yet one whose arbitrary nature becomes intensified by the acts of housekeeping performed by Sylvia. Although she would not mourn, she would become a good widow, thus denying her daughters access to the loneliness she had inherited from her female ancestors and capturing them in the realm of empty rituals performed within the house erected by Edmund.

In her reading of *Housekeeping*, Paula E. Geyh describes Edmund's house as

the center of an outwardly expanding sphere of patriarchal power which links the father to the house as family.... This idea of the father-house functions as a symbolic principle of coherence which links the realms of the physical (in the permanence of material houses), the social (in the stability of the family and of the society of the town), and the subjective (in the physical body and the integrated psyche). (106–07)

Geyh also argues that it is possible for women to keep the house as the container of patriarchal values even when the male, dominant figure is absent. The woman “becomes” the house through the act of housekeeping, thus internalizing her position within patriarchal culture as woman-as-housed. Yet whereas Geyh provides a convincing example of the Home Economics teacher's house as the female space where Lucille can be successfully reintegrated into the symbolic order, the house kept by Sylvia after Edmund's death—according to Geyh offering its inhabitants the same possibility—does not seem to fit her argument. Even though Sylvia maintains the domestic order, thus fulfilling the cultural obligation of a conscientious widow, the girls leave the house. The “symbolic principle of coherence” has been broken—although the physical realm is maintained by the mother, it is no longer compatible with the social (as the cultural requirement of mourning has not been fulfilled) and the subjective (as it shelters three melancholy subjectivities who do not know how to mourn their father).

Sylvia's daughters seem to respond to loss in a way proposed by Julia Kristeva in her analysis of female melancholy. According to Kristeva, in order to escape depression caused by the identification with the devalued figure of the mother, a girl must separate herself from the mother by committing symbolic matricide: “For man and woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity” (27). After Edmund's death, the children—Molly, Helen, and Sylvie, aged sixteen, fifteen, and thirteen respectively—become aware of Ruth, following her everywhere. This intensified awareness may have three significant consequences. First, the children observe the unperformed mourning, and the sense of loss becomes transferred to them during the five “years of almost perfect serenity,” filled with “the customs and habits of their lives [which] had almost relieved them of the need for speech” (Robinson 15). These five uneventful years, Ruth writes, “lulled [the] grandmother into forgetting what she should never have

forgotten" (13). Although the nature of Sylvia's forgetting is never explicitly stated, one may assume that she neglected to provide her daughters with the matrix for mourning their father. By displaying the longing she inherited from her female ancestors, she presents her daughters with a representation of melancholy whose origin they are likely to misread as the loss for the dead husband. Consequently, they respond to the death of their father by contracting their mother's melancholy.

Secondly, these are the years the girls spend within the house that is deprived of the father figure they are not shown how to mourn. Instead of meaningful acts of mourning, the daughters' lives become filled with the repetition of customs, a suggestion that the work of mourning has been replaced with rituals that do not provide a successful means to complete the process. Significantly, the thrifty description of these five years suggests the women's withdrawal into the house as the primary space of their existence. Hollowed-out, meaningless acts of housekeeping testify to the fetishization of the house. But again, *Housekeeping* does not yield easily to the psychoanalytical reading of melancholy proposed by Kristeva. Instead, it creates a zone of its own. While for Kristeva "with fetishists, fantasy and acting out replace the denial of psychic pain ... following the loss of biopsychic balance due to object loss" (45), the house is not Sylvia's fetish as in her case denial does not seem necessary. Yet, the house becomes a fetish for her daughters. For Sylvia, the husband as the sign of patriarchal power over the symbolic does not have to be readmitted into the house, for he has not been granted the power of significance in the first place. It is her daughters who need to be admitted into the symbolic through the work of mourning they are denied.

Finally, by following Sylvia, her daughters become overattached to the mother who, Hendrick argues, becomes a mirror for their selves. But the image the girls confront is not a clear reflection of a unified self as "mothers ... are so suspect in this novel": "the maternal appearance of sameness or relatedness masks instead one of incompleteness and doubling that will always evoke memories of the dead mother and of abandonment" (Hendrick 146). Hendrick's reading, however, by, first, considering the mother to be the lost object of love (to some extent true in case of Ruth) and, secondly, drawing a parallel between Helen, Sylvie, and Ruth, places them in front of the same image of the dead mother. Consequently, even though Hendrick's argument fits Ruth as she is the character most likely to associate the image of her mother with death and abandonment, Helen and Sylvie have not been abandoned by Sylvia nor did they have to come to terms with her premature de-

mise. In fact, they are the ones who leave their mother. Therefore, Helen and Sylvie's "reflection" is not marked by the same loss as Ruth's. But if one slightly readjusts the mirrors, they may transform into a machine for tracing a transgenerational phantom. Ruth, looking at the memory-image of Helen, sees her, looking at Sylvia's melancholy that, in turn, reflects the loneliness of her female ancestors. Even though each reflection bears traces of individual losses of each generation of the Foster women (Helen and Edmund), they are also marked by the same loneliness Helen and Sylvie contracted during their period of overattachment to Sylvia, one that predates Edmund's death.³

By leaving Fingerbone, Sylvia's daughters separate themselves both from the mother and the empty sign of the symbolic they cannot access from within their father's house. Interestingly, this solution seems effective only in the case of Molly who manages to find a powerful substitute for the symbolic order—religion. She never returns to Fingerbone, which suggests that she has managed to overcome loss and enter the symbolic. Helen and Sylvie, on the other hand, although seemingly capable of rejecting the identification with the mother propagated by Kristeva, never cure their melancholia. This, however, not necessarily contradicts Kristeva's theory. Perhaps physical separation does not equal a symbolic one; maybe the five years the girls spent with Sylvia made too strong a mark on them, rendering matricide a problem that cannot be solved in spatial terms. Maybe, even though far away from Sylvia, Helen's and Sylvie's egos are still being killed by their mother. Yet, whereas neither of them manages to reposition herself within the symbolic through a successful marriage, Sylvie, by becoming a transient, is able to enter the male domain that allows her to remain a melancholic theorized by Kristeva, one who "appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia of the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos" (33). But again, while Sylvie often remains silent, seemingly supporting Kristeva's thesis about the female melancholic's inarticulateness, she simultaneously maintains her own relation to the symbolic, which, according to Kristin King, is the source of her power to disrupt the symbolic order of

³ Another slightly unsatisfactory reading of the five years following the derailment suggests that Edmund's death and the years his daughters spend with Sylvia mark their return to the pre-oedipal phase. This argument, however, does not explain why all the daughters leave Sylvia. If, as claimed by Smyth, Edmund's death cuts free "[t]he cord that binds the daughters to the symbolic" (285), simultaneously allowing the transformation of the house into a more dynamic, open structure that predates Sylvie's return to Fingerbone, then why does she have to leave in the first place?

the house (571). Sylvie's personal link with the symbolic manifests itself through stories of people she met during her wanderings that she often repeats to Lucille and Ruth. "When she remembered that we were there and that we were children," Ruth remarks, "she sometimes tried to make her stories useful" (Robinson 88). But most of the time, Sylvie's tales are excessive in their lack of didactic purpose—the only goal they seem to serve is to give vent to language. However, Lucille's strong opposition to Sylvie's stories reveals their other characteristic—they have been "collected" in the traditionally male space of transience, outside the domestic space of the house.

Whereas it was still theoretically possible for Sylvia's daughters to return to Edmund's house, such a return is no longer a viable option for Sylvie and Ruth, as they burn down the house at the end of the novel. And although this symbolic act does not put an end to their melancholy, it allows them to claim the malady as their own. By becoming vagrants, they enter the space that, although culturally coded as male, allows them to renegotiate their melancholy identities in relation to a different place than the structure of the patriarchal house. It is from within that space that Ruth's account, haunted by the secret carried by the Foster women, may finally emerge.

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THE LOST OBJECT OF LOVE? THE MYSTERY OF UNPERFORMED MOURNING
IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *HOUSEKEEPING*

Summary

The article investigates Marilynne Robinson's debut novel *Housekeeping* in an attempt to uncover the origin of the book's melancholy. Following Sigmund Freud's insight about the lost object of love and combining Abraham and Torok's and Kristeva's writings on melancholy, the text argues that the Foster women's overwhelming melancholy may be attributed to three factors: the grandfather's death, creating the rupture in the symbolic order; the grandmother's unperformed mourning, which failed to mend that rupture; and the house's progressing decay—a constant reminder of the gap between the semiotic and the symbolic.

Keywords: Marilynne Robinson; *Housekeeping*; melancholy; mourning; transgenerational haunting

UTRACONY OBIEKT MIŁOŚCI? TAJEMNICA NIEUKOŃCZONEJ ŻAŁOBY
W POWIEŚCI *DOM NAD JEZIOREM SMUTKU* MARILYNNE ROBINSON

Streszczenie

Artykuł zadaje pytanie o źródło melancholii w *Domu nad jeziorem smutku*, debiutanckiej powieści Marilynne Robinson. Wychodząc od poświęconych naturze melancholii rozważań Freuda, Abrahama i Torok oraz Kristevy, tekst stawia tezę, iż melancholia kobiet z domu Foster wynika z trzech współzależnych czynników: śmierć Edmunda Fostera stworzyła wyrwę w porządku symbolicznym; jego żona, zaniedbując proces żałoby, umocniła tę wyrwę; zaś postępująca ruina rodzinnego domu jest ciągłym przypomnieniem o niezasklepionej szczelinie pomiędzy semiotycznym a symbolicznym.

Słowa kluczowe: Marilynne Robinson; *Dom nad jeziorem smutku*; melancholia; żałoba; między-pokoleniowa transmisja fantomu