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Readings in American Literature
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“I always thought that I’d see you again”:

The Effect of Memory on Authorship in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*

In a letter to a former student, Marilynne Robinson wrote, “In this whole world...billions of trapped and isolated psyches while away their captivity with art of every degree of minorness.”¹ Robinson’s *Housekeeping* shows the author wrestling with this idea of captivity and false creativity. Writing with a lineage of revered American authors, such as Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, behind her, Robinson works to find her own voice, not just remain captive in her art. She wrote in her letter, “I’m at the moment an agnostic...with a powerful dream of heaven...a late sun and a bright sky and, in place of wind, wafts and tides of silence – silence to bend the grass and move the clouds and soothe away the habit of speech.”² Heaven for Robinson is a departure from everyday, meaningless language that is filled with “every degree of minorness.” In *Housekeeping*, Robinson tries to achieve this heaven, to transcend throwaway chatter. The scene in which Ruth and Sylvie are on the lake late into the night shows a contemplation of this idea of transcendence and its consequences. On one level, this scene shows Ruth locating herself among all of the lost figures that control her life. But on another level, this scene shows Robinson trying to discover her place in the genealogy of American authors. Ultimately, Robinson finds fault in the idea of transcendence, instead locating her voice in the power of still being flesh, being present.

¹ Marilynne Robinson to Jacques Preault, Box 1, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

² Ibid.

Towards the end of *Housekeeping*, Ruth says, “Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it” (194). The lake in Fingerbone is filled with memories for Ruth and her family. Ruth’s grandfather and mother died in the lake, their bodies still submerged somewhere below the surface. The smell of lake-water fills Ruth’s house, reminding her of those she has lost. Even characters that don’t die in the lake, like the grandmother, seem to Ruth to have drowned. Ruth says of her grandmother’s death, “It was as if, drowning in air, she had leaped toward ether” (164). So the depths of the lake hold those most powerful memories, the memories of loss. When Sylvie and Ruth get in the boat to go back to Fingerbone, Ruth says, “Sylvie climbed in with a foot on either side of me. She twisted around and pushed us off with an oar, and then she began to reach and pull, reach and pull, reach and pull” (161). As Sylvie steers the boat onto the water, Ruth repeatedly says the word “pull,” linking this pulling of the oars with the pulling of loss and memory. In this moment, Ruth feels herself being pulled towards the memory of her mother and that intense sense of loss that governs her life.

Once Ruth and Sylvie are in the middle of the lake, the power of the lake, the loss it holds, pulls Ruth even more. “I toyed with the thought that we might capsize,” Ruth says, beginning to think about death (162). As the scene progresses, Ruth’s ideas about death seem more like ideas about a rebirth or revelation. “It was the order of the world,” she says, “that I, the nub, the sleeping germ, should swell and expand” (162). Here, Ruth compares herself to a seed waiting to bloom, and only the lake water that is so filled with the memories of her family can make her grow. “Say that...I miraculously, monstrously, drank water into all my pores,” she continues (162). What would happen if she allowed these memories and losses to consume her? What if, instead of attempting to lead a normal life, she immersed herself completely in the

memories of her ancestors? Ruth imagines the possibility of disappearing into this genealogy that has consumed her for so long.

In many ways, this scene resembles the Emily Dickinson poem “I felt a funeral, in my Brain.” Dickinson writes, “I felt a funeral, in my Brain, / And Mourners to and fro / Kept treading – treading – till it seemed / That Sense was breaking through - .”³ Like Dickinson, Ruth imagines a death of some sort, be it physical death or some death of the mind. She imagines what might happen if she drowned, contemplates the stages of dying. She starts out by merely “toying” with the idea, but as she imagines the water, the memories of the dead, filling her pores, she delves deeper into this fantasy. This progression, from thinking lightly about the idea of dying to really trying to understand death and what might happen mirrors Dickinson’s first stanza. Ruth says, “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). Picturing her entire self dissolving into the water, Ruth is vanishing into listening. She is listening to the other world that the lake holds and vanishing into that darkness. Similarly, Dickinson writes, “As all the Heavens were a Bell, / And Being, but an Ear.”⁴ Ruth disappears into listening. She becomes a listener (an Ear), and this listening, to her thoughts and her memories and everything around her, consumes Ruth. In this way, both Ruth and Dickinson imagine being as listening, as transcending to a heightened sense of awareness.

The last lines of the fourth stanza of “I felt a funeral, in my Brain” read: “And I, and Silence, some strange Race / Wrecked, solitary, here - .”⁵ Ruth sits in the boat, remembering her lost family in the lake and imagining herself joining them. She assumes that after this drowning

³ Emily Dickinson, “I felt a funeral, in my Brain,” *poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, web, <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15391>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

“would come parturition in some form” (162). Ruth would drown and be reborn, having completely immersed herself in the memory of her family. But then Ruth begins to question her idea. “The only true birth,” she says, “would be a final one, which would free us from watery darkness, and the thought of watery darkness, but could such a birth be imagined?” (162). Ruth wonders if she will ever be free of the power that loss has over her life. She is no longer so sure that death will bring her the revelation and rebirth she desires. Ruth even questions her mother’s death: “I think it must have been my mother’s plan to rupture this bright surface, to sail beneath it into very blackness, but here she was, wherever my eyes fell...never dispelled but rising always, inevitably, like a drowned woman” (163). Earlier, Ruth thinks about following her mother’s fate by drowning in the depths of the lake. She imagines that her drowning and disappearing into the lake could reunite her with her mother. She says, “Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart...I would rather be with them, if only to see them...If I could see my mother” (159). But now Ruth wonders if drowning actually brought rebirth for her mother. Instead of disappearing, Ruth’s mother reappears constantly, unable to “sail...into very blackness” (163). With this realization, the possible solution to Ruth’s loneliness and life filled with loss vanishes. She is alone: “wrecked, solitary, here.” By vanishing into listening, Ruth begins to question her ideas about dying, especially her mother’s death. She finds herself wrecked in this world, unable to die and be reborn into some higher form (and now unsure if that is what happened to her mother).

Just as Ruth wrestles with the idea of disappearing into her family’s genealogy, and if that is even possible, Marilynne Robinson uses this passage to explore and locate her own voice as an American author. In one of her notebooks, Robinson connected her own life to Ruth by writing, “It seems strange that there are people – not many, but most of those who matter to me –

whom I am flatly doomed to miss. Yet they people my thoughts. Where would I be without them? So alone.”⁶ With *Housekeeping*, as Robinson works to find her voice as an American author, it seems that many of the figures who people her thoughts are American authors who have come before her. In a symposium for *The New York Times* entitled “The Hum Inside the Skull,” Robinson said, “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 answer to them in my mind.”⁷ These authors are for Robinson what absent ancestors are for Ruth. They people her thoughts and influence her greatly.

Thus, it is particularly significant that the scene in which Ruth contemplates drowning on the lake so closely resembles an Emily Dickinson poem. For Robinson, the water in the lake described in *Housekeeping* does not hold her dead ancestors. Instead, it holds the thoughts and ideas and writings of earlier American authors, like Dickinson and Whitman. Robinson is a “sleeping germ,” a young author who has not completely found her voice yet. “It was the order of the world, after all,” she writes, “that water should pry through the seams of husks, which, pursed and tight as they might be, are only made for breaching” (162). Here, Robinson contemplates the inevitable influence of these voices on her writing. She acknowledges the unavoidable effect of American voices that have come before her, that haunt her and people her thoughts.

Towards the end of the novel, Robinson writes, “There will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine” (192). Going back to the earliest ancestors, Robinson again invokes this idea of genealogy and heritage. She

⁶ Marilynne Robinson, note in Notebook 9, Box 1, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁷ “The Hum Inside the Skull – A Symposium,” *New York Times*, 13 May 1984, web, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/05/13/books/the-hum-inside-the-skull-a-symposium.html?pagewanted=5>.

imagines a mother figure, be it Helen or Eve, who will guide her and comfort her. In an unpublished scene, Ruth speaks of seeing her mother while crossing the bridge. She says that her mother, not Sylvie, guided her crossing. Interestingly, when Ruth speaks of her mother leading her across the bridge, she says that her mother had grown “accustomed to the dark,” recalling an Emily Dickinson poem that begins the same way. In fact, in many early drafts, Robinson writes of a mother figure guiding Ruth. Thus, in trying to find her voice as an American author, it seems that Robinson sees Dickinson as a mother figure. The poet, though absent, greatly influences Robinson’s ideas and style. Combined with the passage with Ruth on the lake, many unpublished drafts of the scene where Ruth crosses the bridge show Robinson trying to balance following Dickinson’s influence and finding her own voice as an author. An early draft of the crossing reads, “I made my mother walk ahead of Sylvie and me, because she knew all the hazards of the lake and was so accustomed to the dark.”⁸ Robinson writes of blindly following this mother figure. In a later draft, she writes, “I made my mother walk ahead of me, and I said, ‘Helen?’ and she said, ‘Yes?’ And when I tried to catch her by the sleeve I stumbled.”⁹ Here, Ruth, and thus Robinson as an author, cannot follow the mother figure as easily because she is too far ahead. The final draft does not even include an explanation of the crossing of the bridge. These drafts progress from Ruth following the mother into the dark to Ruth being unable to keep up with the mother to the mother being absent from the crossing. We see Robinson adjusting the writing, so Ruth’s journey into transience is not defined by her mother’s guidance. In the same way, Robinson works to find her own authorial voice, one that is not consumed by the influence of Emily Dickinson.

⁸ Marilynne Robinson, unpublished “Housekeeping” scene in Notebook 7, Box 1, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale.

⁹ Marilynne Robinson, unpublished “Housekeeping” scene, Box 1, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

In the scene on the lake, Ruth realizes that she is completely alone, that she cannot believe death will bring a rebirth that will reunite her with her mother. A late, unpublished draft of Ruth's crossing the bridge uses much of the same language and imagery as earlier drafts but takes Helen out of the scene. Robinson writes, "No breath of oatmeal, no rot of apples, nothing...It was the sense that we were alone that proved we were alive. For the void over which we walked was populous, and the vastness through which we walked was populous." There is a clear shift from Ruth following her mother (and Robinson following Dickinson) to Ruth knowing she is alone, while still sensing the presences of those lost all around her. Thus, as Robinson finds her voice as an American author, she is simultaneously alone and surrounded by the presences of absent writers. Robinson's writing shifts, so she is her own guide, as opposed to Dickinson leading the way. Surely, Dickinson still influences Robinson's work. But, through Ruth, the author takes on more agency as a writer and, in doing so, locates herself in this genealogy of American authors.

With the final question in the scene on the lake ("The only true birth would be a final one, which would free us from watery darkness and the thought of watery darkness, but could such a birth be imagined?"), Robinson acknowledges this tension between trying to locate her own voice and bending to the influences of other authors. At first, she imagines a rebirth of her writing through disappearing into the influence and history of American authors. "Unhouse me of this flesh," she writes, signaling her impulse to dissolve into the history. Like Ruth, Robinson imagines a possible rebirth into some higher, revelatory form of writing. After taking in all of the water, after being filled to the brim with the voices of other American authors, "then, presumably, would come parturition in some form" (162). But she later questions this total transcendence. What is the cost of dissolving oneself into this larger history? In another draft of

Sylvie and Ruth's journey across the bridge, Robinson writes of Ruth realizing that she and Sylvie are flesh. "I put one hand behind her neck and with the other I felt her throat, the long pushing cords in it, the slight loosening of flesh beneath her jaw...I pulled her down to me, and bit and tasted her hair...'You're alive,' I said."¹⁰ Ultimately, Ruth is not a transcendent soul. She is flesh and remains flesh, as she becomes a transient instead of killing herself. In this scene and others, Robinson acknowledges the living power of her work. As an author, she is still flesh, still alive. In the scene on the lake, Ruth says, "I think it must have been my mother's plan to rupture this bright surface, to sail beneath it into very blackness, but here she was, wherever my eyes fell...a thousand images of one gesture, never dispelled but rising always, inevitably, like a drowned woman" (163). The attempt to transcend seems to make one even more present in the lives of others. But as flesh, one still has power over one's own work, not just the work of others. So Robinson seizes on the power of her non-transcendence to locate her voice.

In yet another draft of Sylvie and Ruth's journey across the bridge, Robinson writes, "When bonds are broken, souls fly free."¹¹ Through her writing, Robinson ultimately frees herself from the overwhelming influences of authors like Emily Dickinson. She finds a way to carve her own path in American literature by consciously invoking these authors, as opposed to letting their influences overrun her work. She changes the story, letting Ruth cross the bridge without following her mother. In breaking the bonds between Ruth and Helen, Robinson also breaks the bonds between herself and Dickinson. She locates herself, instead of losing herself, in this American authorial lineage.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Marilynne Robinson, unpublished "Housekeeping" scene in Notebook 7, Box 1, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.