

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies

Volume 17, Issue 1

2017

Article 12

BRIDGING

Souls All Unaccompanied: Enacting Levinasian Feminine Alterity in Housekeeping

Makayla Steiner*

*University of Iowa, makayla-steiner@uiowa.edu

Copyright ©2017 by the authors. *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <https://ir.uiowa.edu/ijcs>

CRAFT CRITIQUE CULTURE, Work of Recognition

Souls All Unaccompanied: Enacting Levinasian Feminine Alterity in *Housekeeping*

Makayla Steiner

Perhaps the most contested, most misunderstood concept in Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of ethics is that of feminine alterity and its role in creating a hospitable dwelling. Levinas has long been criticized by feminist thinkers for his complex and occasionally contradictory comments on the feminine, most notably by Simone de Beauvoir, who lambasted him as a patriarchal thinker who disparaged women by situating them as "Other" to men. Others, including Luce Irigaray, have admired his philosophy in general while expressing concern regarding the lack of feminine subjectivity.¹ Though more recent feminist scholars have attempted to shift the conversation to more nuanced perspectives, feminine alterity remains an elusive and enigmatic concept, and a site of consternation for those invested in Levinasian ethics. Such criticisms, however, misinterpret feminine alterity as opposite to the masculine self, which, while accurate in many Western representations of femininity, is not necessarily the case in Levinasian philosophy. Contrary to early feminist concerns, Levinas does not speak of the feminine as a subject in opposition to the masculine subject, nor has he established feminine alterity as inferior or

discriminatory.² If anything, he elevates the feminine by defining it as the intangible presence that opens the possibility for ethical behavior between and among physical subjects. In Levinasian ethics this presence—contingent on time, circumstance, and individual need—becomes the very lynchpin by which a dwelling is made habitable. Moreover, it functions to create an intimate interiority, or a sense of welcome for the Other in the self's physical, emotional, and psychological space. Levinas frequently describes this comprehensive process of welcoming as “hospitality” (Totality 155-156).

Comparatively little has been written on the Levinasian feminine, especially as it applies to literary texts, in part because of Levinas's insistence that his is to be a lived philosophy—what Bettina Bergo describes as an exploration of “the meaning of intersubjectivity and lived immediacy” (Stanford Encyclopedia)—rather than an intellectualized theory. This frustrates efforts at conceptual mastery of feminine alterity because the very nature of the feminine as alterity presupposes the inability to measure or totalize it. Consequently, it may be more productive to observe the strengths and weaknesses of the process by which feminine alterity creates a habitable dwelling not by testing it against alternative philosophical or theoretical perspectives, but against the density of lived experience of women, in fact, as embodied in a novel about women's lives and relationships, written by a woman. There are few contemporary novels that fit this description as neatly as Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980). The novel is particularly well suited as a test case for the functions and limits of feminine alterity, not only because it is a novel about women by a woman, but also because it highlights various methods by which feminine alterity functions to welcome the lonely and make the home a place of refuge, while illuminating its theoretical limits. A fuller version of this essay reviews several key characteristics of feminine alterity as explicated by Levinas and Jacques Derrida, considers various ways in which Robinson's characters both support and complicate the efficacy of feminine alterity as a welcoming force with the power to create habitable dwellings and eradicate the lack perpetuated by solitude, and attempts to demonstrate how the novel itself is the best enactment of feminine alterity functioning to create a hospitable habitation where ethical behavior—what Levinas sometimes calls holiness—becomes possible. This briefer version first analyzes the process by which two of her characters attempt, and fail, to create hospitable dwellings, and then discusses how Robinson's writing itself enacts feminine alterity as its language of welcome invites readers into the imaginative conscious of the novel.

Inhabiting an Hospitable Home

Housekeeping has long been read as a feminist version of the American male bildungsroman. Scholars have paid careful attention to its nineteenth century literary influences, and many have read it as a specifically feminist text. They are not entirely wrong, for in opening with Ruth's matrilineal genealogy, *Housekeeping* immediately establishes itself as a novel of women. However, as Tate Hedrick observes, “Robinson's text does not, at least overtly, take up feminist concerns with writing or with female subjectivity” (138). Nor is it simply, as Martha Ravits claims,

“an ‘enduring recognition of the mother-daughter passion’—and the endless consequences of its disruption” (647). Above all, *Housekeeping* is a meditation on the loneliness and isolation attendant to the fracturing of a family. Though not directly mentioned in the novel, Levinas’s feminine alterity is clearly at work in the efforts of Sylvia Foster, and later her daughter Sylvie, to make home a place of refuge and asylum for the children orphaned as a result of unexpected death, suicide and abandonment.

The novel offers several interpretations of how feminine alterity might function to create a hospitable dwelling where ethical behavior is a possibility. The first is enacted in Sylvia Foster’s dedication to habits of good housekeeping. Though Edmund Foster built the house on Fingerbone Lake, it is evident that Sylvia is its owner and that the physical space of the home is of utmost importance to her sense of safety. After her husband’s death she frequently reminds her daughters of the house’s value: “‘Sell the orchards,’ she would say, looking grave and wise, ‘but keep the house. So long as you look after your health, and own the roof above your head, you’re as safe as anyone can be’” (27). In addition to the importance Sylvia places on the house as an edifice, she is concerned with the material atmosphere necessary to maintaining an orderly and comfortable home. Ruth describes her grandmother as a woman who

had always known a thousand ways to circle [her daughters] all around with what must have seemed like grace. She knew a thousand songs. Her bread was tender and her jelly was tart, and on rainy days she made cookies and applesauce. In the summer she kept roses in a vase on the piano, huge, pungent roses, and when the blooms ripened and the petals fell, she put them in a tall Chinese jar, with cloves and thyme and sticks of cinnamon. Her children slept on starched sheets under layers of quilts, and in the morning her curtains filled with light the way sails filled with wind. (11-12)

Unfortunately, however much she intended to make her home a warm and comfortable space, Sylvia’s meticulous housekeeping does not ensure healthy family life. Sylvia’s matronly consistency denies a sense of mystery that would create a truly habitable space for her daughters, one that would allow them to fully grieve their father’s death. Ruth describes the years following the tragic accident that sent Edmund Foster’s train to the bottom of Fingerbone Lake as “serene, eventless years [that] lulled my grandmother into forgetting what she never should have forgotten” (13). While Sylvia managed to create an almost perfectly hospitable refuge for her daughters in a material sense, and later for her orphaned granddaughters, she was not able to create a space of psychological and emotional refuge. The “perfect quiet” that “settled into their house after the death of their father” (15) is not the “silent language” or the “understanding without words” Levinas suggests is unique to feminine alterity, but rather a symptom of emotional imprisonment. In contrast to the silence of the Levinasian feminine, which signals attentiveness to the Other’s needs,

Sylvia's silence is the effect of an emotional absence that ultimately denies the presence of feminine alterity. Consequently, her daughters do not feel at liberty to mention the event that "had troubled the very medium of their lives" (15), and they suffer their father's haunting absence alone.

If Sylvia Foster more successfully enacts the material functions of feminine alterity in the home, her daughter, Sylvie, more fully enacts its intangible functions. Robinson's terminology when introducing Sylvie is strikingly similar to Levinas's description of the feminine as a quiet and elusive presence whose purpose is best fulfilled when most unnoticed. Robinson writes, "Sylvie came into the kitchen . . . with a quiet that seemed compounded of gentleness, and stealth and self-effacement" (45). Though Ruth and Lucille initially anticipate that Sylvie will be a predictable replacement for their mother, it quickly becomes evident that Sylvie will not be so easily defined. Like the Levinasian feminine, Sylvie is difficult to define because she constantly slips away from the light. "An itinerant", "A migrant worker", and "A drifter," Sylvie exists most comfortably in the shadows (31). She chooses to dwell in her mother's old bedroom, which "was not a bright room, but in summer it was full of the smell of grass and earth and blossoms or fruit, and the sound of bees" (89). In this room Sylvie literally dwells in a place of non-light that blurs the boundaries between indoor and outdoor sensory experiences. Additionally, she wanders in and out of the house, unannounced, and resists using unnatural light. Her nontraditional approach to "keeping house" and her unpredictable disappearances unsettle her nieces almost as much as her obsession with the lake in which both her father and sister drowned. The fear Ruth and Lucille experience each time Sylvie goes missing is palpable, and at one point Ruth resorts to physical violence in an attempt to ensure that Sylvie is actually present. Though the girls find Sylvie's unorthodox methods and her silence disconcerting, her nonchalance regarding their own whereabouts is what solidifies their opinion that Sylvie "was not a stable person" (82). This is, by all definitions of the word, absolutely true. Sylvie is not stable, because stability falls into the realm of the knowable and the predictable. The feminine alterity that guides Sylvie's efforts to make her nieces feel safe and at home is precisely an alterity—a difference, or otherness—to traditional interpretations of the role of woman as "home maker," and it belongs to the realm of the infinite. It is useless to expect the feminine to be stable, since the other who is to be welcomed is not a stable entity either.

For this reason Sylvie unapologetically ignores the practices her mother and the women in town deem critical to creating a welcoming home. Sylvie takes an unusual approach to housekeeping not because, as Christine Wilson argues, "she suffers from a number of fundamental misunderstandings about what it means to keep a house" (304), but because she believes that if a woman is comfortable in her own skin, she can be comfortable in whatever earthly dwelling she inhabits. Therefore, she prioritizes responding gently and with care to her nieces over sweeping and mopping and making the bed. In so doing, she creates the possibility for an "attitude of holiness" that Levinas describes as "a reversal of the normal order of things, the natural order of things . . ." (Righteous 47). This reversal, this focus on the intangible needs of others, makes holiness a possibility—it does not guarantee it. Indeed, as

Rebecca Painter observes, “Uncertainty reigns nevertheless” (322) and in this particular instance uncertainty overshadows the mystery and modesty that allows the feminine to offer each individual guest or stranger a welcome tailored to his or her need. Such uncertainty finally becomes the driving force behind Lucille’s decision to abandon her aunt and her only sister.

Though Sylvie is attentive to quiet and intangible needs in a way her mother was not, her indifference to material objects prevent her from creating a wholly welcoming dwelling. As a result, Sylvie only partially succeeds in maintaining a hospitable habitation for the orphans left in her care, just as her mother before her had done. Though Ruth seems more comfortable with Sylvie’s methods, they bring Lucille to the edge of despair. In an attempt to assuage her own sense of discomfort Lucille demands that Sylvie and Ruth adapt themselves to her worldview. In one memorable scene, she literally illuminates the disorder of their lives by turning on the kitchen light. Ruth recounts,

The window went black and the cluttered kitchen leaped, so it seemed, into being, as remote from what had gone 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 . . . Lucille had startled us all, flooding the room so suddenly with light, exposing heaps of pots and dishes, . . . A great shadow of soot loomed up the wall and across the ceiling above the stove, and the stove pipe and the cupboard tops were thickly felted with dust . . . In the light we were startled and uncomfortable. Lucille yanked the chain again, so hard that the little bell at the end of it struck the ceiling, and then we sat uncomfortably in exaggerated darkness. (100-101)

This scene exemplifies one of the most vexing paradoxes of feminine alterity: in the moment it opens to the possibility of welcome and holiness, it also opens to the possibility of violence. Levinas defines violence as that which forces people to “play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves” (Totality 21). And in this case, though feminine alterity influences Sylvie’s desire to create a hospitable dwelling for her nieces, she does not successfully answer to Lucille’s need for material safety and security. The methods that seemingly answer to Ruth’s solitude simultaneously edge Lucille into isolation and emotional abandonment.

Writing Feminine Alterity

Though neither Sylvia nor Sylvie successfully creates a fully hospitable dwelling for the children in their care, their efforts highlight some of the practical difficulties of enacting feminine alterity in “lived immediacy” (Bergo). Robinson, however, is more successful at the level of the text itself. Both Levinas and Derrida emphasize the importance of silence in feminine alterity, and in *Housekeeping*, the “silent comings and goings of the feminine being” (Totality 156) take place in Robinson’s language and textual imagery, and ultimately function to create what one

might call a “textual dwelling” where holy experience is made possible as the one reading becomes concerned with the lives and deaths of other people.

Much of the plot seems to take place in a shadowy deluge, among descriptions of ghostliness, dawn, dusk, cold, and other places of fleeting light. Descriptions of vibrant color and light are limited, and often wedged between bleaker explanations of ordinary events. In one example Robinson writes, “After four days of rain the sun appeared in a white sky, febrile and dazzling . . . The water shone more brilliantly than the sky, and while we watched, a tall elm tree fell slowly across the road. From crown to root, half of it vanished in the brilliant light” (62). This beautiful portrayal of the town post-flood, which begins “After four days of rain,” is immediately followed by this caveat: “Fingerbone was never an impressive town. It was chastened by an outsized landscape and extravagant weather, and chastened again by an awareness that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere” (62). The unpredictable juxtaposition of such images gives the text a mysterious quality by which feminine alterity can begin the welcoming process without drawing undue attention to itself—making the one reading feel at home in the story, instead of an outsider looking in.

Furthermore, the language within which feminine alterity functions to welcome also creates a sense of hopefulness for restoration in a story that in fact seems to negate the possibility of such hope. Robinson achieves this, in part, by including various allusions to Biblical history, complimented with religious and scientific metaphors. In one example, Robinson describes a net that “If it swept the whole floor of heaven, it must, finally, sweep the black floor of Fingerbone, too” gathering all the people and material possessions lost there (91). In such a sweeping, she writes, “There would be a general reclaiming of fallen buttons and misplaced spectacles, of neighbors and kin, till time and error and accident were undone, and the world became comprehensible and whole” (92 emphasis added). Such passages persuade readers to consider the novel’s serious questions regarding the complexity inherent to family relationships, the limits of responsibility for others, and the necessity of restoration and gathering while refraining from directing them to any particular judgment. As Karen Kaivola observes, the novel’s “acceptance both of Ruth and Sylvie’s radical difference as transients and of Lucille and the town’s conventionality situates readers in unsettling territories where contradictory perspectives meet” (670). In such territory one must answer to the otherness of each character, without doing violence to any. In other words, one must be good to all of them.

Levinas once described alterity as “nonindifference,” suggesting that “in language there is the possibility of expressing in a didactic manner this paradoxical relation of love, which is not simply the fact that I know someone . . . but the sociality irreducible to knowledge which is the essential moment of love. Practically, this goodness, this nonindifference to the death of the other, this kindness, is precisely the very perfection of love” (Righteous 58). And love, says Levinas, “is the proximity of the other—where the other remains other” (Righteous 58). In *Housekeeping* Robinson manages to do with language what her characters cannot do in practice: adhere to the feminine ability to accept the “otherness” of each character,

and offer everyone a habitable place of welcome. In so doing, she makes it possible, though not guaranteed, that her readers will do the same; that they will be nonindifferent to each character, living and dead. Every time this happens, feminine alterity successfully fulfills its role in Robinson's text as the essence that makes it possible to love the other—the ultimate necessity for feeling at home.

Notes

¹ For a more comprehensive overview of feminist responses to Levinas's principle of feminine alterity, see Tina Chanter's edited collection, *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (2001).

² For example, in the essay "Judaism and the Feminine" Levinas offers an unusually positive reading of female Biblical figures. He writes, "All the switches along this difficult path, on which the train of messianic history risked being derailed a thousand times, have been supervised and controlled by women. Biblical events would not have progressed as they did had it not been for their watchful lucidity, the firmness of their determination, and their cunning and spirit of sacrifice. But the world in which these events unfolded would not have been structured as it was – and as it still is and always will be – without the secret presence, on the edge of invisibility, of these mothers, wives, and daughters; without their silent footsteps in the depths and opacity of reality, drawing the very dimensions of interiority and making the world precisely habitable" (31).

Works Cited

- Bergo, Bettina. "Emmanuel Levinas." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, summer 2015, url: plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/levinas/.
- Derrida, Jacques. "A Word of Welcome." *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 36-45, 93-94.
- Hedrick, Tace. "The Perimeters of Our Wandering Are Nowhere": Breaching the Domestic in *Housekeeping*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1999, pp. 137-51, doi: [dx.doi.org/10.1080/00111619909601569](https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619909601569).
- Kaivola, Karen. "The Pleasures and Perils of Merging: Female Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1993, pp. 670-90, doi: [10.2307/1208805](https://doi.org/10.2307/1208805).
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis. Duquesne University Press, 1969, pp. 154-58.
- Painter, Rebecca. "Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction." *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2010, pp. 321-40, doi: [10.1177/014833311005900216](https://doi.org/10.1177/014833311005900216).
- Ravits, Martha. "Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *American Literature*, vol. 61, no. 4, 1989, pp. 644-66, doi: [10.2307/2926999](https://doi.org/10.2307/2926999).
- Robbins, Jill, editor. "Interview with François Poirié." *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 23-83.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Housekeeping*. Picador, 1980.

Wilson, Christine. "Delinquent Housekeeping: Transforming the Regulations of Keeping House." *Legacy*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2008, pp. 299-310, doi: 10.1353/leg.0.0028.