

Melancholy and Lost Desire in the Work of Marlen Haushofer

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I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one's desire.

Jacques Lacan (*Seminar VII* 319)

Introduction

A sense of loss and nostalgia, tinged with wistfulness, permeates the texts of Marlen Haushofer. Something has been lost, although it is never quite clear what. The term "melancholy" frequently appears in the reception of Haushofer's work (Caviola, Fliedl, Gürtler, Lorenz).¹ A familiar, if archaic sounding word harking back to the four humors, the term "melancholic" does indeed seem to be the most appropriate adjective for describing both the situation of the protagonists and the style of the writing in which their perspectives are expressed. Melancholy, however, is not a well-defined concept. Before I turn to Haushofer's work, therefore, I would like to examine the idea of melancholy a little more closely.

Given Haushofer's attention to the psychological make-up of her characters, and the importance she accords to their past and to forgetting and repression, it seems fitting to consider some psychoanalytic interpretations. I shall begin with Freud's understanding of melancholy, then turn to Kristeva's reevaluation of Freud's concept, and subsequently show the relevance of Lacan's conceptions of subjectivity, desire, and sexual difference. Ultimately I shall argue that not only is the idea of melancholy crucial to Haushofer's writing, but that *her writings themselves can help reevaluate our conception of melancholy*; they can help refine it, and they can even help *redefine* it.

Freud's Melancholy

In his 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud attempts to distinguish melancholia from mourning. He argues that mourning involves a loss that one gradually accepts, as one slowly withdraws libido from a lost object and directs it onto a new one. Melancholia, on the contrary, involves an inability to accept a loss, an identification with the lost object, and an introjection of it into one's ego. What Freud calls normal mourning generally proceeds along conscious lines, although the

de-cathecting of the lost object is a protracted process. In cases of melancholia, however, an unconscious dimension may be involved: what the melancholic has lost—or what precisely s/he has lost in the object (why the loss is so devastating)—may not be at all evident.

Among other things, Freud notes that the melancholic person is full of self-recriminations, but that if one looks at these self-accusations closely, it becomes evident that they are actually directed towards someone else: “someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love” (257). Freud analyzes this phenomenon as follows. Melancholia, like mourning, begins with a shattered object-relationship: the loss of a person or an ideal. But instead of the free libido being transferred to another object, it is withdrawn into the ego. The individual identifies with the lost object as a way of preserving it, and introjects it into her ego. But because the person had ambivalent feelings towards the object (perhaps even love *and* hate), one aspect of her ego—the idealizing aspect, which admired or loved the object—now expresses hostility towards another aspect of the ego—the disparaging aspect, which disliked or hated the object. (In Freud’s view, the melancholic can go so far as to kill herself because she is able to treat herself as an object.)

Elements of this are present in a number of Haushofer’s works, especially in *Die Mansarde*, where the self-deprecations of the melancholic protagonist manifest themselves in precisely the way Freud describes. In this novel, each day over the span of a week, a housewife receives in the mail a large envelope with pages from notes she wrote as a diary seventeen years earlier. One night she had abruptly become deaf without physical cause; feeling she was an encumbrance to her husband and young child, she felt compelled to go away to live in a house in the woods. After a time her hearing suddenly returned, and she went back to her husband and child. Now, years later, she reads from the diary that had then been stolen and for some unknown reason is now being mailed back to her. As she cleans the house, prepares meals, and occasionally meets an acquaintance, she reflects on what she wrote and what she thought and felt during the time of her traumatic deafness. She also reflects on her current damaged and desolate existence with her husband. The protagonist’s repeated self-recriminations are not really directed against herself, however; her self-critique is ultimately a criticism of her husband, Hubert,² who is of a social order that disparages women and what is deemed feminine, and who she feels abandoned her. Anne Duden provides a wonderfully apt summary of the novel, but I would disagree with her statement that the protagonist “macht ja niemandem einen Vorwurf” (110). It is true, as Duden writes, that the protagonist invariably retracts the accusations, provides an explanation “die alles zurücknimmt, beschwichtigt, entlastet ...” (113); but in the first instance the accusations have been put into words.

The loss to which the protagonist seems to be responding is the loss of Hubert as someone on whom she can depend, and the loss is her ideal of marriage and family. For Freud, melancholy involves the loss of such a specific object—although this lost object may not be conscious to the subject. This is what I see as most problematic in

Freud's theory: he assumes that in melancholia, as in mourning, a *specific object* has been lost (be it a person or an ideal, be it conscious or unconscious). This assumption, it seems to me, is what Haushofer's texts dispute. They certainly express deep loss and suggest that something has gone missing, but what has been lost remains unclear (and is not simply unconscious, in my view). Haushofer's texts are infused with longing, but that which is longed for remains undefined. If the works were not so irredeemably sad, one might characterize them as nostalgic, because they seem to hark back towards another, earlier time. But then one realizes that this time never was.³ The nostalgia is rather for what might have been, an imaginary world where the losses have not taken place. Haushofer's melancholic work does not involve instances of unconscious loss, but of losses that are vague and unclear. Haushofer's protagonists are depressed, their lives depressing, but both what is lost and what is longed for remains elusive.

It is tempting to seek to determine the lost object that imbues Haushofer's fictional works. Undoubtedly there have been losses, and the works are permeated with sadness; "*Trauer*" is a recurrent word in the texts, and a number of them do suggest that a particular loss is being mourned. On the one hand, the loss might be the innocence of childhood, the sense of *Geborgenheit* that one has (or imagines one had) as a child. One can read Haushofer as looking backward, longing for an *earlier, less damaged existence*. On the other hand, in almost all the works the female protagonists suffer (or have suffered) greatly at the hands of the male characters. Hence, the melancholic aspects of the works may be interpreted as containing a longing for a time when there will be communication and, above all, parity between the sexes. One can also read Haushofer as looking forward, as criticizing her time in a way that implicitly invokes some *future, less misogynist world*. Finally, one can read the texts as presenting a more general critique of modern society and the alienation it entails, and as evoking a *less complex, less denatured world*.⁴ There is something to all these perspectives: almost all the novels clearly convey that leaving the world of childhood involves a relinquishment that is permanently damaging; almost all present at least one brutal male character; and almost all see little positive in modernity. But there is also much more to Haushofer's rendering of "*Trauer*" and loss.

In my view, the loss that imbues Haushofer's texts is amorphous. The texts seem to offer little way out in part because there is nothing *concrete* to get out of! Even when something specific is lost, the melancholic tone suggests that this is only *the echo of some earlier loss*. In *Eine Handvoll Leben*, for example, we learn that Betty, the protagonist, had simulated her own death and left the country years earlier. Now that her husband has died, she returns incognito to see her son and the former girlhood friend who subsequently married her husband. Betty looks at old photos that call up her past, mainly her turbulent time as a young girl in a boarding school, but also the brief time when she was a wife and young mother, and then eventually also the lover of another man. At a certain point, she had felt that she needed to break away; she also felt that her girlhood friend would make a better wife and a better

mother than she had. The novel comprises Betty recalling and reflecting on her childhood and youth leading up to the time of her leaving. But although she has returned to see what she gave up—including her son, now an adult—there is a clear sense that she had already lost something much earlier, before she escaped her familial life, rather than that she lost something by leaving.

And even with the very young child Meta in *Himmel, der nirgendwo endet*, extremely early losses echo even earlier ones. Near the beginning of this novel, Haushofer brilliantly depicts the little girl watching (unobserved) her mother holding her newly born brother (39–40). Meta longs to enter their warm world, which is now closed to her; she tries to imagine herself into it, but only furthers her understanding of this world as lost to her. From the opening sentences of the novel, however, even before this salient incident, it is clear that Meta longs for happiness and affection but realizes that such emotions are always only temporary and that she will ultimately lose them again. In other words, the birth of her brother only solidifies a sense of loss that she has already been feeling.

Kristeva's and Haushofer's Melancholy

A depiction of melancholy that more accurately corresponds to what occurs in Haushofer's writings can be found in Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun* (1989). According to Kristeva, the depression, or even despair, that often overcomes us when we experience a loss or failure seems to call forth an earlier injury. Indeed, she states that the depression into which we sink often does not seem warranted by the events; it is as if some "old trauma" has been awakened (4). Kristeva explicitly and radically challenges Freud's conception of melancholy. In her view it invokes an earlier loss—one to which we have never been reconciled. In *Die Tapetentür*, we find a similar assertion: "Alles Leben war zu Surrogat geworden, und doch konnte man das Unbehagen und die Trauer nicht ganz unterdrücken, die in den Herzen der Menschen saßen, jene vage Erinnerung an etwas längst Verlorenes, das nur noch im Traum Gestalt annehmen durfte" (149–50). At the beginning of *Die Tapetentür* Annette's lover leaves for six months. At first she is relieved to be by herself, but she quickly becomes lonely and somewhat forlorn. She meets a ruthless lawyer named Gregor, becomes pregnant, and they marry. Annette realizes that Gregor is brutal and egotistic, but she feels drawn to his self-assurance and strength. As her pregnancy advances, he begins seeing other women. She feels isolated and abandoned, escaping into a dream world of her childhood. Annette gives birth, but the child is stillborn, and she barely survives the labor. She seems to have lost the will to live, and at the very end of the novel is being cared for by her Uncle Eugen (her life with Gregor seems to be over). Although she is gradually improving, Annette's sorrow is overwhelming. It seems less related to the recent event than to a retrieval of a deeper loss buried within her and to her having been abandoned when she was very young.

Kristeva suggests—against Freud's view of melancholic sorrow as linked to an ambivalent relationship to an internalized object—that melancholic sadness points

“to a primitive self—wounded, incomplete, empty” (12). The melancholic is attached *not* to an *object*, but to a pre-object or a place, an original oneness that—like death—cannot be represented. Such an attachment to an original oneness can be found on the first page of *Die Mansarde*, where the protagonist refers to “eine Welt, die rund und ungebrochen war und die es nicht mehr gibt” (5). Kristeva describes a primordial loss that eludes representation, characterizing melancholy as “the most archaic expression of an unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound, so precocious that no outside agent (subject or agent) can be used as a referent” (12). For Kristeva, melancholy is linked to a pre-object, akin to the Lacanian real (13) and to primary narcissism; it “is inscribed within us without memory” (14), she writes. Hence it is exceedingly vague, for it precedes the distinction between subject and object.

This view of melancholy is especially interesting when one considers Haushofer’s *Die Wand*, which is probably the least melancholic of her works and yet is the novel in which the protagonist has indubitably lost the most. In *Die Wand* there has been a kind of nuclear disaster, and the entire world—with the exception of a small area enclosed within an invisible wall—has been frozen into lifelessness. Having lost everything she once had—her husband, two daughters, and her former life—the protagonist attempts to survive by growing vegetables and raising the few animals that also survive. Now one may argue that the novel is the least melancholic because the protagonist is so busy eking out an existence that she does not have much time for melancholy. But the novel is not without melancholy, and I rather think the fact that it is not more melancholic is related to the fact that the loss—although great (the entire world as the protagonist has known it!)—can be said to be specific in a certain sense. In other words, *the loss is the most concrete and hence the least linked to melancholy*. The situation is somewhat similar in the novella “Das fünfte Jahr.” Although four-year-old Marili feels, and even absorbs, the sadness emanating from the grandparents who are raising her, the novella is not really that melancholy. This is because the loss—even though devastating—is concrete: all of the grandparents’ five children have died.

Kristeva argues that the lost pre-object can be understood as “the self’s borderline element” (15). It stems from the time and the space before separation from the mother or primary caretaker. Retroactively, however, it is linked to the maternal object, for the maternal object is generally that from which the child separates as it emerges from primary narcissism. Hence, given its eventual maternal face, Kristeva believes that men and women relate differently to this pre-object. She notes what she refers to as the sociologically proven fact that women are more prone to depression. In her view, women are more likely to lock the maternal object within themselves: “There is no hatred, only an implusive mood that walls itself in and kills me secretly, very slowly, through permanent bitterness, bouts of sadness, or even lethal sleeping pills” (29). Such bitterness and sadness permeate *Die Mansarde* and infuse the very being of the protagonist. They are most evident in her remark that she could kill her

husband or herself, but that it would not really make any difference: “Der Kristallaschenbecher stand auf dem Tisch und sah sehr schwer aus. Ich hätte Hubert ganz leicht damit erschlagen können, aber ich spürte nicht das geringste Verlangen, es zu tun. Genausogut hätte ich mich selber erschlagen können, heute würde das keinen Unterschied mehr ausmachen” (62). Bitterness and sadness also pervade “Wir töten Stella,” where the protagonist says: “Und selbst wenn ich in ein Auto liefe, wäre es nicht schlimm, ich meine, nicht wirklich schlimm” (8). In this novella Anna reflects on the death of Stella, the daughter of an old school friend and a temporary boarder in Anna’s home. She was nondescript, but Anna saw her “underlying beauty,” helped her into brighter, more attractive clothes, and told her she was beautiful. As a result Anna’s predatory husband, Richard, became attracted to Stella and had an affair with her. After a few weeks, however, he grew bored and lost interest, and Stella walked in front of a truck. The death is officially proclaimed an accident although no one believes this. Anna must deal with the fact that she did nothing to help or protect the young girl. She looked away so that her cherished relationship with her son, Wolfgang, would not be disturbed. Wolfgang has grasped what has happened, however, and their relationship is permanently damaged. For the duration of the novella, the protagonist wanders from room to room, besieged by sadness. It is difficult to imagine a more accurate description of this protagonist’s condition than Kristeva’s reference to an “implosive mood that walls itself in” and kills her “very slowly” (29).

In Kristeva’s view there is a debilitating form of melancholy specific to women. Without a doubt, the sadness and melancholy of Haushofer’s protagonists is linked to the fact that they are female. The clear difference between the roles, expectations, and psychological make-up of men and women comes through in all the works. The male characters are presented as having another way of being in the world and as responding differently to difficulty and affliction.⁵ They are usually self-interested, even predatory (as in *Die Tapentür*, where even the name, Dr. Xanthner, makes one think of a panther, and in “Wir töten Stella,” where Richard is explicitly referred to as a *Raubtier* [38]). Furthermore, in those texts where the male characters, too, are depicted as damaged beings, as in *Die Mansarde*, their response seems more one of stoicism than of melancholy.

According to Kristeva, the melancholic person is unable to let go of the pre-object, but also unable to transfer longing for that which is not an object—for that which resists representation and invokes death—to other objects, a difficulty which lies in the fact that the attachment to the pre-object cannot be displaced onto an “*Object of Desire*” (13). She states that for the melancholic person “no erotic object could replace the irreplaceable perception of a place or pre-object confining the libido or severing the bonds of desire” (13). Even when Annette, in *Die Tapentür*, is completely enamored of Gregor and loses herself in him, she is aware that “vor der Trauer kann er mich auch nicht bewahren” (77).

Whereas Freud regards his melancholic patients as introjecting a lost object with which they have unconsciously identified, Kristeva considers melancholy to involve

and invoke a primordial difficulty in identifying with another object in the first place. For the melancholic there is only a weak primary identification—one upon which it is difficult to build (14). This idea is interesting in relation to the fact that many of Haushofer's characters have difficulties with what we would today characterize as "drawing boundaries." This condition is especially acute in *Die Tapentür*, where Annette's sense of boundaries is so weak that she alternates between desperately wishing to be alone and attempting to merge with her partner. Near the novel's beginning she is with a partner from whom she needs to escape: "Körperliches Verlangen nach Alleinsein überwältigte sie so sehr, daß sie mit den Nägeln auf der Unterseite des Sessels zu kratzen anfang" (14). When her lover leaves for a sojourn in Paris, she is thrilled to be alone: "Allein, dachte sie glücklich, mutterseelenallein, und das Wort schmolz wie Zucker in ihrem Mund" (31–32); further, "Eine Tür hinter sich zusperren, was konnte es schon Besseres geben?" (32). Within two weeks, however, she already begins to feel spooked at living alone. After meeting and marrying Gregor, she gives herself over to him completely: "Gregor ist das Brot, das mich am Leben erhält. Nur ihm gelingt es, die Welt für mich zum Leben und Glühen zu bringen" (128). But from him, too, she eventually needs to escape.⁶ In *Eine Handvoll Leben* we find a somewhat similar situation with a protagonist who "hatte einmal Freiheit, Kälte und Selbständigkeit gewählt und sich zeitlebens nach Zärtlichkeit, Wärme und Geborgenheit verzweifelt geseht" (101).

In *Die Mansarde*, personal boundaries are also a theme. The protagonist does not know how to be with another person, especially her husband, and how to be a separate being at the same time. Her sole pastime is attempting to draw a picture of a bird that does not appear alone. She says: "Es ist mein Ziel, einen Vogel zu zeichnen, der nicht der einzige Vogel auf der Welt ist" (21). At one point in the past she almost succeeded:

Vor vielen Jahren, als ich mich noch gar nicht auf Vögel festgelegt hatte, gab es einmal einen Star, der aussah, als höre er aus weiter Ferne den Ruf eines zweiten Stars aus den Nachbargärten herüberdringen. Die Art, wie er den Kopf hielt, und die aufgeplusterten Federn deuteten darauf hin. Aber es war nur eine Ahnung, kein Einander-Erkennen. (21–22)

She associates a separate and independent existence with loneliness and lack. At the end of the novel, however, we have the sense that she has made some progress insofar as she begins to draw dragons: "Ein Drache ist ein Wesen, das einsam aussehen darf. Ihm steht es zu. Er wird nicht geboren, ist plötzlich da und weiß nicht, warum, das sieht man ihm an" (214). She seeks to portray a form of life destined to be solitary, a being that does not need another in order complete itself.

But the idea of melancholy as a primordial difficulty identifying with another object is most interesting in relation to *Die Wand*, which can be understood to present an alternative form of subjectivity which is neither traditionally masculine nor

traditionally feminine. Margaret Littler provides a cogent summary when she states that *Die Wand* depicts “not the dissolution of the subject, but the emergence of a new subject-object relation” (219). In this novel the protagonist must fend for herself and, therefore, becomes increasingly self-reliant. She survives because she is resourceful, practical, and clever. At the same time, however, as she becomes *independent* insofar as she is not physically dependent on anyone else for her survival, she becomes more *interdependent*, more and more intertwined with the natural world around her:

Es war fast unmöglich, in der summenden Stille der Wiese unter dem großen Himmel ein einzelnes abgesondertes Ich zu bleiben, ein kleines, blindes, eigensinniges Leben, das sich nicht einfügen wollte in die große Gemeinschaft. Einmal war es mein ganzer Stolz gewesen, ein solches Leben zu sein, aber auf der Alm schien es mir plötzlich sehr armselig und lächerlich, ein aufgeblasenes Nichts. (185)

It is fascinating to watch how the protagonist becomes *more* of a person, but *less* of a discrete self, if one can put it like that.⁷

The novel does indeed seem to be presenting, or attempting to present, another form of subjectivity. Furthermore, as the only person apparently left alive, the protagonist speculates that if a man had also been left alive, he might force her to work for him simply because he was stronger (65-66). It is interesting that this resonance of the master and slave dialectic is ultimately more Marxist than Hegelian. Hegel thought that the master would seek recognition as well as work from the slave. The protagonist is worried only that the man would put her to work. Had a man, too, survived, she postulates: “Auf jeden Fall war [sic] er körperlich stärker als ich, und ich wäre von ihm abhängig gewesen. Vielleicht würde er heute faul in der Hütte umherliegen und mich arbeiten schicken. Die Möglichkeit, Arbeit von sich abzuwälzen, muß für jeden Mann eine große Versuchung sein. Und warum sollte ein Mann, der keine Kritik zu befürchten hat, überhaupt noch arbeiten” (65-66). Perhaps because she herself does not actively seek recognition or acknowledgment from the animals for which she cares, she no longer thinks about the human subject’s need for recognition.

According to Kristeva, the melancholic person is unable to let go of the pre-object, but also unable to put it in signs. Melancholy invokes an earlier loss—one to which the person has never been reconciled, a clinging to (or being clung to by) an earlier state that one cannot bear to lose. For Kristeva this is the essence of melancholy. Bound to the pre-object, which is linked to the mother and to death, the melancholic tries to bring it into the Symbolic; yet it eludes signification. Sadness thus becomes a stand-in for the lost pre-object, a kind of surrogate object: “the sole object; more precisely it is a substitute object [melancholics] become attached to, an object they tame and cherish for lack of another” (12). In *Die Tapetentür* the penultimate

two sentences of the novel depict Annette attempting to tame and cherish her pain: “Und sie wollte auch den Schmerz lieben und an ihr Herz nehmen. Jeder floh vor ihm und jeder haßte ihn; bei ihr sollte er seine Wiege und Heimstatt finden” (200). The protagonist in *Die Mansarde*, too, has built up a personal relationship with her grief: “Dazu war es viel zu früh, ich drängte die Trauer zurück, ich versprach ihr, daß sie abends in der Mansarde wiederkommen dürfe, und sie verschwand gehorsam” (69). Kristeva further argues that the melancholic identifies with her sadness, which becomes a kind of ersatz-object. In fact the melancholic seems to use this object to hold herself together. Kristeva writes: “sadness reconstitutes an affective cohesion of the self” (19). This, it seems to me, is an apt characterization of the protagonist of *Die Mansarde*, who seems to hold herself together with and through her sadness.

Undeniably, sadness is constitutive in many of Haushofer’s works and also may be connected to a kind of living death. Referring to the fact that the protagonist in the early novel *Eine Handvoll Leben* simulates her death in order to escape her unhappy life, Christa Gürtler writes: “In den späten Texten bedarf es keiner derartigen Inszenierung des Scheintodes mehr, das Nicht-Leben wird zur Alltäglichkeit” (159).⁸ Indeed, the protagonist in “Wir töten Stella” says: “Vor Jahren war mir etwas geschehen, das mich in einem reduzierten Zustand zurückgelassen hatte, als einen Automaten, der seine Arbeit verrichtet, kaum noch leidet und nur für Sekunden zurückverwandelt wird in die lebendige junge Frau, die er einmal war” (22). And further on: “Stella, noch in der feuchten Erde geliebt und gehalten von hundert kleinen Wurzelfingern, um wieviel endgültiger bin ich tot als du!” (28). Finally, in *Die Tapetentür* Annette too refers to a living death: “Selbst wenn die Mauertrümmer sie damals erstickt hätten, es wäre gar nicht ihr richtiger Tod gewesen, sondern ein dummer und schmutziger Zufall. Der wirkliche Tod mußte schon früher eingetreten sein, oder er wartete noch auf sie, es war ihr auch ganz gleichgültig” (49).

Against Freud’s reading of melancholy, Kristeva regards the melancholic’s inclination towards suicide *not* as evidence of hostile, murderous impulses towards the introjected object, but as the wish for a merging with sadness. This situation would seem to be the case with Annette, who at the end of *Die Tapetentür* wishes to commit suicide. She decides against it only because she does not want to hurt her Uncle Eugen, who is taking care of her and who cares about her. The slightly hostile impulses she does experience are only towards this uncle, for whom (as they both realize) she stays alive because she does not want to hurt him and bring more pain and suffering into the world. At the same time, she herself seems to have become one with her pain:

Der Gedanke schmerzte, aber sie hatte sich daran gewöhnt, daß jeder Gedanke schmerzte, und nicht nur die Gedanken, auch die Sonne, das Meer, die spielenden Kinder, der weiße Sand und die bunten Sonnenschirme. Der Schmerz saß in ihr, brach aus allen Poren und überschwemmte die Welt. Er war alles, was ihr geblieben war, und sie durfte dieses Letzte nicht verlieren. (191)

The conclusion of *Die Tapetentür* is an extraordinarily convincing depiction of a suicidal inclination as the wish to merge with sadness.

I would suggest, then, that Haushofer's texts refute Freud's version of melancholy as involving the loss of an object (introjected into the unconscious) and support Kristeva's understanding of melancholy as linked to a vague, unrepresentable pre-object. But I also think there is more to it than this. I would like to suggest that what melancholy may invoke is not only the loss of a primordial pre-object, but also a primordial loss of desire itself. This notion I find implicitly embedded in Jacques Lacan's work, to which I will now briefly turn.

Lacan's and Haushofer's Mourning and Desire

Lacan's conception of desire is linked to loss and mourning. For him there is an early form of loss, a type of mourning that inaugurates subjectivity. Indeed, in Lacan's understanding of the formation of the subject, loss, lack, and mourning are intertwined with desire. During infancy, according to Lacan, the child attempts to embody the desire of the mother or primary caretaker. The child identifies with the "desire of the mother," Lacan writes, referring *both* to *what the mother desires* and to *this desire itself*—for the child is not yet able to distinguish the two. The child tries to discern the mother's desire, to embody it. The child wishes to be the sole object of her desire, to be everything for her, to be what Lacan refers to as the "imaginary phallus" or the "maternal phallus." It attempts to fill a lack it perceives in the mother and to be what completes her. (Lacan refers to the mother, but besides the fact that the primary caretaker may be someone other than the mother, it is important to note that at this early stage, of course, sexual difference is non-existent for the child.) Eventually the "paternal function" intrudes in what Lacan refers to as the "nom-du-père." The "nom" of the father plays on the homonym of the father's name (his position in the socio-symbolic order) with his "non," his "no"—his interdiction against the child's absolute access to the mother. It is what interferes in the child's attempt to complete the "mother." In other words, the paternal function is simply a third term (although associated with the father and the socio-symbolic order) that comes between mother and child. The "paternal function" forces the child to recognize that it cannot embody the desire of the mother, cannot be the sole focus of her attention, the sole object of her desire. Hence the child must renounce the possibility of being the imaginary phallus. This is such a deep, wounding loss that Lacan refers to it as "castration."⁹ This castration, this gradual realization that one cannot be "everything" for the (m)other, is a key to working one's way through the Oedipal complex.

What is crucial here, from my point of view, is that the possibility of the imaginary phallus is lost to the child at a time when the child does not clearly distinguish between the "object" of desire and the *desire* for the object. The imaginary phallus is not yet differentiated from the desire for it. In other words, the child must renounce the "mother's desire" in both senses of the term: the object of the mother's desire and the desire itself. What Lacan puts forward, but what is seldom sufficiently empha-

sized, is that this primordial loss is *as much a loss of desire as it is the loss of an object (or pre-object) of desire*. What must be lost and mourned, then, is desire as well as its object.

Lacan's complex understanding of the relationship between desire, loss, mourning, and Oedipal development is perhaps made clearest in his insightful interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*." He states that *Hamlet* is a "tragedy of desire" (11), but that at the same time the play should be recognized as being about mourning. His argument can be summarized thus: Hamlet is unable to kill Claudius *because Claudius is the object of Gertrude's desire (is the imaginary phallus), with which Hamlet identifies*.¹⁰ In identifying with the object of the (m)other's desire, Hamlet aligns his desire with hers. According to Lacan Hamlet must learn that he cannot be the phallus. He must learn to accept and begin to mourn the fact that he cannot be the object of his mother's desire; he must disentangle his desire from hers. Lacan sees the play as presenting a parallel with the Oedipus complex, which, he explains, "goes into its decline insofar as the subject must mourn the phallus" (46). Mourning the phallus involves relinquishing the mother and finding other objects of desire. Hence, in Lacan's interpretation Hamlet's re-finding of Ophelia (after her death, unfortunately) as an object of desire (though an impossible one) helps his identification with Gertrude's desire begin to dissolve. But it is only when Hamlet's narcissistic attachment to the imaginary phallus is suddenly sundered—when he is mortally wounded and forced to accept that he will never be able to be the phallus—that he is finally able to strike Claudius. Though Hamlet hardly goes through a process of mourning, Lacan sees Shakespeare's play as illustrative of the loss of, and the mourning for, the imaginary/maternal phallus that the child cannot embody. This is necessary in order for the child to emerge from the Oedipal situation. And here again, I would stress that the mourning for the imaginary phallus is not simply a mourning for a now lost object and possibility, but simultaneously a mourning for the *desire* for the imaginary phallus, a desire with which Hamlet (like the child) had aligned himself.

It seems to me, then, that the earliest losses involve more than the loss of an object, even an amorphous, undiscernible object like Kristeva's pre-object. They are linked to desire, and to the loss and relinquishing of desire. What Haushofer's texts suggest, as I see it, is that melancholy is not simply an archaic loss of a pre-object, but a *primordial loss of desire*. Withdrawal from the world and suspension of desire are generally regarded as *temporary* consequences of mourning and as a more *enduring* characteristic of melancholy. It is precisely on the issue of desire that I think mourning and melancholy should be distinguished, but in an entirely different way: I would argue that the loss of desire may be a *consequence* of mourning, but that it is a *cause* of melancholy. In mourning, a loss (temporarily) extinguishes desire; in melancholy, I would contend, *desire itself is what has been lost*. What makes Haushofer's texts melancholy in my view, then, is not that they depict melancholy in the Freudian sense of the unconscious introjection of a lost object, or even in Kristeva's

sense of the primordial loss of a pre-object. What makes the works melancholy is that both the characters and the texts evoke lost desire—not the loss of desire for any specific object, but a more primordial loss of desire as such.

In *Die Mansarde* the salient event that determines the plot is the protagonist's earlier abrupt loss of hearing when she awoke one night and heard the fire department's sirens. Doctors discerned nothing physically wrong with her; she had simply forgotten how to hear (57). The novel never provides any clear explanation for the protagonist's sudden inability to hear. Daniela Strigl links the event to the protagonist's losing her erotic and creative self-determination. She quotes the questions the protagonist poses to herself, and then provides a credible answer to these questions:

“Warum will ich oder jenes fremde Wesen in mir nicht mehr hören? Und warum zu einer Zeit, in der ich endlich das hatte, was ich immer wollte, eine Familie ganz für mich allein?” Die Antwort liegt nahe, dass sie das alles in Wahrheit eben nicht wollte, dass ihr Unbewusstes dagegen rebellierte, weil ihre erotische und künstlerische Selbstbestimmung nun ein Ende haben sollte. Die Krankheit bedeutet also ein Sich-Taubstellen gegen alle Anforderungen einer bürgerlichen Umwelt—deshalb erscheint die Taube ihren Angehörigen auch so anstößig, ja unheimlich. (*Marlen Haushofer* 305)¹¹

This is convincing, but what also needs to be addressed is the fact that the protagonist becomes deaf upon hearing the fire department's sirens, which seem to be somehow connected with the warning sirens that she heard earlier during the war and the refuge taken in basement shelters. Indeed, the time spent in the bomb shelters is the sole basis for an unwilling friendship (with the Baronin), and the war looms as a taboo topic—something she cannot discuss with her husband, because it is something he wishes to forget. Nonetheless, the protagonist herself says that she was never afraid of the bombs; it was the sirens themselves that disturbed her: “Aus irgendeinem Grund konnte ich die Sirenen nicht ertragen. Ich fürchtete nur das Geheul über der Stadt, nicht die Bomben. Das war sehr dumm von mir, aber so war es” (71). I would like to suggest that the fire-fighter sirens that the protagonist hears evoke the sirens of ancient Greek mythology. In Homer's *Odyssey* the song of the sirens is overwhelmingly enticing; it is too beautiful to withstand and evokes irresistible desire. Odysseus is able to hear the song and survive because he has himself tied to the mast of the ship and his men's ears stopped with wax as they row past the area where the sirens reign. The rowers are unable to hear the enticing song; neither are they able to hear Odysseus's cries to be freed from the mast where he is bound. (Without a doubt the story of the sirens from *The Odyssey* would have been familiar to Haushofer's generation; in “Wir töten Stella” the protagonist reads Homer's *Iliad* together with her young son.¹²)

On the one hand I think that the protagonist (like Odysseus, who has himself

bound to the mast) *fears* the song of the sirens. Elsewhere in the text she refers to the image of her sinister mother-in-law, the Hofrätin, as “in seiner Art schön, wie eben eine Wasserjungfer schön sein kann” (115), thus associating mermaids—a later version of the sirens—with that which causes harm (in the tradition of Heine’s *Loreley*). On the other hand (also like Odysseus), the protagonist *longs* to hear the song of irresistible desire.¹³ But at some level, I believe, she recognizes that she is unlike Odysseus, who manages to hear the call of desire and survive. She realizes that she is like Odysseus’ men, who have their ears stuffed with wax, continue rowing, and hear nothing. None of these men makes it back to Ithaca; they are generally considered dispensable—a feeling the protagonist herself certainly felt in relation to Hubert’s dominating mother and her own increasingly minor role in the family. Dagmar Lorenz writes:

In dem Roman *Die Mansarde* ist die Fremdheit zwischen Schwieger-tochter und Schwiegereltern von thematischer Bedeutung. Das Motiv der Fremdheit, also auch das der Hilflosigkeit durch Isolation, wird hier effektiv durch die zeitweilige Taubstummheit der Heldin betont, das von dem Gefühl der Ehefrau, im Hause ihres Gatten und nicht im eigenen zu wohnen, komplementiert wird—sich also in der Rolle einer unbezahlten Haushälterin zu befinden. (“Marlen Haushofer” 181)

It seems to me that the protagonist unconsciously recognizes that her prosaic life and familial role now deafen her to the dazzling and irresistible call of desire. It is for this reason, I think, that she suddenly loses her hearing without medical cause. Near the end of the novel, she recounts a dream she once had that I think helps illuminate her earlier loss of hearing in relation to the sirens:

Nixen saßen darin und Wassermänner und spielten auf Harfen und Flöten. Ich konnte durch das Glas hindurch nichts hören, aber ich wußte, sie spielten die wirkliche Musik, die nicht für Menschen bestimmt ist. Ihre schuppigen Schwänze glänzten wie Perlmutter, und ihre langen gelösten Haare schwammen auf dem Wasser. Sie waren sehr schön. Atemlos vor Entzücken stand ich und sah ihnen zu. Plötzlich wußte ich, daß ich nicht zugleich mit diesen Geschöpfen hier sein durfte. (207–08)

The protagonist does not connect herself in her dream of the water creatures and the transcendent music with her loss of hearing in the night when she heard the firefighter sirens, but as she herself says: “Nichts ist schwieriger als sich selber auf die Schliche zu kommen” (117). It seems to me, in any case, that the abrupt deafness that seemed so inexplicable—even to the protagonist herself—is linked to the call of desire that she knows she can no longer hear.

In relation to the loss and recovery of hearing, Mireille Tabah states: “Die Ich-Erzählerin der *Mansarde* wird taub, als sie durch das Heulen einer Feuerwehrsirene

in der Nacht an die nächtlichen Hustenanfälle ihres Vaters, an ihr damaliges Gefühl des Allein- und Ausgeliefertseins und damit an den unbewältigten ‘Verrat’ der Eltern erinnert wird [...]” (187). Rita Morrien, too, emphasizes the importance of the protagonist’s parents, who died when she was a child, and links the sound of the firefighter sirens and the protagonist’s ensuing deafness to the sound of her father’s (tuberculosis-induced) coughing. Although I am not quite convinced of this, I do find interesting Morrien’s argument that the protagonist regains her hearing when she sees the sight of blood and that the red color reminds her of the coral necklace that her father once gave her. For equally abrupt, and also apparently inexplicable, is the restoration of the protagonist’s hearing

I do think the sight of the blood is important, but in my view the following three factors combine and are condensed in the restoration of the protagonist’s hearing. First, her situation has become acute: the anonymous man she refers to as “X” has asked her to leave with him. Because she cannot stand staying where she is, she is considering doing so (“Ich bin über dreißig, und ich habe den Jäger satt und das Tal und die Berge, meine Kerkermeister” [210]). It is clear that she feels something must change. Second, the character X writes her a note telling her he needs her, and she remarks that the word “need” is underlined twice. That X wants her to leave with him—although he has apparently committed some horrendous deed/s—simply because *he needs* her indicates the irrelevance of her own desire; she has again been put into the position of Odysseus’ rowers. Third, the protagonist says that the sight of blood (from broken glass) reminds her of something, and on the previous page she recounts becoming terribly upset at seeing blood seeping from a sack in which the hunter has tied kittens and at which he has then repeatedly shot. In the paragraph following the one where she regains her hearing she says: “Niemand wird mir den kleinen Ferdinand [her son] wieder wegnehmen können” (212). I think the newly born kittens have reminded her of her young child and evoke her desire to protect him (including from her mother-in-law) and to be a mother to him. While there is little interest in or acceptance of female desire in the protagonist’s social world, a woman’s desire to mother her son is one that is culturally endorsed. In other words the protagonist is able to at least recover a form of desire—socially sanctioned motherhood—when she recovers her hearing.¹⁴

The vague, indefinable loss that permeates Haushofer’s novels, then, is not simply the unrepresentable loss of a pre-object in Kristeva’s sense, but linked to lost desire and to an original lack of separation between desire and its object. And although the works may sometimes seem nostalgic, I believe they are something else. While one may experience nostalgia for a past time or for other circumstances, melancholy, in my view, evokes not only lost circumstances, but also the desire they elicit. Melancholy is linked to an earlier intertwining of desire and its objects, and a mourning for this intertwining. This comes through most clearly, I think, in the following lengthy passage from *Eine Handvoll Leben*:

Später, als sie allein war, gab sie diesem Verlangen nach und streifte, wie sie es immer erträumt hatte, durch die nächtlichen Gärten und Gehölze, und jedesmal kehrte sie mit dem Geschmack der Enttäuschung im Mund davon zurück.

Nicht, daß die Wirklichkeit schwächer gewesen wäre als ihre Vorstellungskraft, der Grund zu dieser Enttäuschung lag in ihrer beschränkten Aufnahmefähigkeit.

Nur ein Wesen von riesenhaften Ausmaßen konnte, so schien es ihr, diese Nächte ertragen, die wilden Gerüche, den Wind, der im Laub raschelte, den Sternenhimmel mit seiner blendenden Kälte und die plötzliche, lautlose Erstarrung, ehe der Tau fiel, das Aufstehen des Morgenwindes, der scharf über die Gräser fuhr und die feinen Nebel hochjagte. Dafür war Betty zu klein, ihre Sinne nicht scharf genug und ihr Herz zu schwach. So kam es, daß sie nicht Glück heimtrug, sondern Traurigkeit. (135)

What makes Betty sad here is the separation between her desire and its objects, a separation she hoped—but which she is unable—to surmount.¹⁵ When Betty is sent to boarding school, she is forced to give up things she loves, but she remains attached as much to the desire the objects evoke as to the objects themselves: “Ihre Zärtlichkeit gehörte noch immer den Dingen: dem Maulbeerbaum im Schulhof, den sie in der großen Pause verstohlen streichelte” (44). The same is true of the adult Annette in *Die Tapentür*, whom a pile of gravel stones suddenly attracts: “Neben ihr auf der Bank lag ein Häufchen Kieselsteine, vergessen von einem fremden Kind. Feucht schimmernd lagen sie in der Sonne, und in Annette regte sich das vertraute Entzücken beim Anblick dieser runden, sauberen Schönheit. Manche waren taubengrau, andere zartrosa oder bläulich, auch ein paar gelbe Steine waren dabei” (102). Near the end of the novel, Annette’s imaginary “Tapentür” leads back not only to the world of childhood, but above all to the world of desire and sensory pleasures; she is inundated with scents and sensations.

In *Die Mansarde* what the protagonist often appears to be lamenting is a loss of authenticity in the modern industrialized world. At one point she says: “Die Milch, die zwar nicht nach Milch schmeckte, war wenigstens gut kalt” (122). Konstanze Fliedl refers to the “erschreckendes Ausmaß von Aktualität” of the texts in relation to (among other things) the “Denaturierung der Lebensmittel” (35). But while the protagonist does depict the flavorlessness of modernity, what is actually being mourned, it seems to me, is sensory pleasures and the desire that accompanies them:

Manchmal glaube ich den Geschmack des frischen Brotes auf der Zunge zu spüren oder den der gelben Butter, die es nicht mehr gibt, seit alle Milch in die Molkereien geht. [...] Alles wird immer teurer, schmeckt immer schlechter und ist dafür bombastisch verpackt. Man denke nur, was sie

aus den Pfirsichen gemacht haben, die bald kein Mensch mehr wird essen können. Vom Wurstzeug gar nicht zu reden. Für ein einziges altmodisches Butterbrot könnte ich auf unseren ganzen Wohlstand verzichten. (34–35).

In the opening paragraph of the novel, there is a lament that even words that evoke desire and intoxication can no longer be used: “Hubert liebt Akazien, von denen es in alten Romanen heißt, der Duft ihrer Blüten sei süß und berauschend. Er ist tatsächlich süß und berauschend, wie ja alle Eigenschaftswörter aus alten Romanen treffend sind. Nur darf man sie heute nicht mehr verwenden” (5). In *Eine Handvoll Leben* the sense of smell plays an important role for Elisabeth, but when she laments lost scents it is less for their loss than for the desire they evoke in her. What Haushofer’s protagonists are mourning, what is fundamental to their melancholy, is the loss of desire as much as its objects.

Freud argues that melancholy involves the introjection of a lost object into the unconscious as a way of preserving it. I suggest that melancholy could be understood as the introjection of lost desire and its objects, as a way of preserving them. Kristeva sees melancholy as a manner of enveloping *sadness*, making it into an ersatz; she sees the melancholic as constituting herself through her sadness. I suggest that melancholy could be regarded as enveloping *lost desire* and making it into an ersatz—that in Haushofer’s works the melancholic constitutes herself through her lost desire.

Die Mansarde is probably the most melancholy of Haushofer’s novels, the novel in which lost desire is most explicitly thematized. The protagonist refers to the time before she lost her hearing and was sent away by Hubert as their “Vorzeit” (12); she relates that although they both try to forget the event, they cannot nullify its effects. Indeed, while she is away she firmly feels that she has been so thoroughly betrayed by Hubert that she will never be able to recover her lost desire and experience it again: “Ich denke an Menschenworte und Huberts Zärtlichkeit in der Nacht. Und wie wir manchmal gemeinsam lachten. Für das alles bin ich jetzt verdorben. Auch wenn ich wieder hören könnte, würde es nie mehr so werden wie früher” (175). Throughout the novel lost desire seems to be what holds her together, a way of containing—and thus preserving—not simply a lost object, but her desire for it. Rather than attempting to retrieve the object source of a desire, the desire itself is embraced and preserved as lost:

Die Liebe Dame roch zart nach Veilchenparfüm, ein Duft, den ich heutzutage selten in die Nase bekomme und der mich mit ungebührlicher Wehmut erfüllt, denn ich liebe Veilchen. Ich liebe sie leidenschaftlich, und kein Mensch schenkt mir jemals Veilchen, was sehr vernünftig ist, denn Veilchen halten sich nicht in der Vase. (190)

The feeling of irretrievably lost desire seems constitutive of the character, as is revealed in the following witty remarks:

Der Schinken schmeckt nach stark gesalzenem Papier, der gebratene Speck ist ranzig, und Wurst kommt überhaupt nicht in Betracht. Dann kann man noch Russisches Ei bestellen, aber das tut keiner ein zweites Mal, genießbar daran ist nur das Salatblatt, das eben nach Gras schmeckt. In anderen Cafés ist es nicht besser, nur teurer, und hier sitzt man wenigstens angenehm und ungestört. Hubert behauptet immer, ich sei heikel, aber das stimmt nicht, ich erinnere mich unglücklicherweise nur daran, wie Speisen eigentlich schmecken sollten. (160)

With reference to *Die Mansarde* Ulf Abraham states: “Alles ist zum Ersatz geworden: das Haus zum Ersatz für ein Zuhause, der Ehemann zum Ersatz für den Partner, das Nebeneinander zum Ersatz für ‘Einssein und Nähe’ [...], das Ritual (‘Spiel’) zum Ersatz für spontanes (Er)Leben, das Schweigen zum Ersatz für die Liebeserklärung” (65). I would add: und verlorene Begierde zum Ersatz für ein begehrendes Subjekt.

Melancholy, then, is not simply inexplicably protracted mourning or loss that has an unconscious dimension, as Freud argues. Neither is it mourning for an unrepresentable pre-object, as Kristeva contends. Rather, it involves a mourning for lost desire—for desire entwined with its objects. And this lost desire may even be a constitutive ersatz. Moreover, melancholy seems to be more linked to women than to men in Haushofer’s works; women seem to have more access to this lost desire. This is something I will now explore further, again in relation to Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories.

Melancholy and Female Subjectivity

The melancholy regarding lost desire experienced by Haushofer’s characters, and expressed in the texts, is linked to a specifically female subjectivity that, I would argue, is itself linked to the constraints under which women lived at the time the works take place. As mentioned earlier, during the Oedipus complex, according to Lacan, the imaginary/maternal phallus must be relinquished and mourned by both sexes. The child comes to acknowledge its “castration,” to accept that it cannot “be” the phallus for the mother. This occurs by assuming that the father “has” the phallus. (Of course, no one has the phallus, which is simply a symbol, a culturally sanctioned object of fantasy.) Moreover, what Lacan is describing is a move from the imaginary phallus to the symbolic phallus. A brief summary of his argument runs as follows: Through the (socially sanctioned) paternal function and through language, the phallus comes to signify what it already represented in the imaginary world of the child: desire and lack—the mother’s desire and the incompleteness, the lack that impelled this desire. Thus, one can only presume the father *has* the symbolic phallus, symbol of desire and satisfier of lack, if one accepts the paternal function and enters

language—in other words, if one relinquishes the possibility of being the imaginary phallus for the mother. The world of signifiers and language—where words stand in for things—has as its precondition, therefore, that we forsake a more primordial *jouissance* or pleasure found in a body unmediated by signs. (Echoes of such a bodily *jouissance* are most clearly evident in the experiences of the child Elisabeth in *Eine Handvoll Leben*.)

Following Lacan's theories, the child in the oedipal complex does not so much acquire a sexual identity as take up a position in relation to the phallus. Only two positions are available reflecting our (usually) binary bodies and language: having or not having the phallus. Each biological sex can take up either position; anatomy is not determinate. But one is forced to take up either the masculine position of "having" the phallus, or the feminine position of its absence. Ultimately, then, the terms "masculine" and "feminine" mean little in themselves; they are indicative only of notions of activity and passivity. Nevertheless, the (symbolic) phallus is linked to the "man." Moreover, there is no correlate symbol for the "woman," who is simply represented as "not having" it (keeping in mind that for Lacan the terms "men" and "women" are differences constituted in language rather than biology). Ironically, however, although the man is regarded as having the phallus, according to Lacan, he is also more constrained, more lacking than the woman, for he is fully under the sway of the phallic function. He has no access to pleasure outside that of the signifier.¹⁶ Due to the fact that the woman is not represented except as a negation, she is not completely subsumed under the phallic function. She has access to a modicum of *jouissance* that is other, that is beyond the phallus. This *jouissance* necessarily recalls the *jouissance* that preceded the intrusion of the world of signifiers and signs upon the body.

Woman, then, is not definitively severed from the desire of the earlier pre-Oedipal or Imaginary Order. Because she is not completely subsumed under the phallic function, it seems to me she is more likely to retain some minimal access to the time when the infant identified with the (pre-)object of the mother's desire, when the object of the desire and the desire itself were not yet separable. Although both boys and girls must surrender the imaginary phallus *and the desire for it*, whoever takes up the masculine position has the illusion of having recovered the phallus, and hence desire. The masculine is aligned with activity and, therefore, with desire, which is active. Consequently, the masculine symbolic position, embodying phallic desire, is in my view more inclined to cover over the loss of earlier desire; in other words, there is a much stronger—though illusory—impression of intact desire. The feminine, on the contrary, is aligned with passivity, and since desire is active, it is difficult for those who take up the feminine position to be aligned with phallic desire (which understands itself as recovered desire). As a result, the feminine position in the Symbolic Order is less inclined to cover over the loss of earlier desire.

The female protagonists in Haushofer's works are melancholic and convey not only a sense of something having been lost, but also an intuition of lost desire.

Melancholy can be seen as a way of mourning, and therefore acknowledging, a connection with this lost desire. The male characters, on the other hand, seem to suppress any awareness of such a loss and to maintain the illusion that they have the phallus and experience phallic desire. For the most part the male characters actively pursue sensual pleasure, but for them desire is separate from its objects—which now only serve as its occasion. They have little access to that earlier time when one attempted to embody the mother's desire—both the object of the mother's desire and the desire of the mother.

Of course, the critique of male domination in Haushofer's texts and the feminist orientation of the works does not mean that Haushofer simplistically divides the world along sexual lines. Fliedl makes the following point: "sensitiver als der Held der Erzählung 'Die Stechmücke' ([*Schreckliche Treue*] 72–81), dessen Suizid vom Tod eines Insekts ausgelöst wird, kann wohl auch eine Frau, gefühlloser als die Baronin in der *Mansarde*, die ihrerseits den Selbstmord ihres Mannes auf dem Gewissen hat, kann auch ein Mann nicht geschildert werden" (36–37). Overall, however, the melancholy tone of the novels is linked to the female protagonists, who have an intuition, a sense, a vague awareness of desire having been lost through entry into the Symbolic Order.

Lacan's contention that man has little connection with what is outside the Symbolic Order, but that woman may experience a link with what is beyond it, is a view taken up by Luce Irigaray, who also asserts that women are more linked to the pre-Oedipal, Imaginary Order, but—unlike Lacan—she protests that the existing language and sign systems allow women little possibility to represent their desire. Indubitably, this difficulty in representing their desire is experienced by most of Haushofer's protagonists.¹⁷ Irigaray states that "it is not that she [woman] lacks some 'master signifier' or that none is imposed upon her, but rather that access to a signifying economy, to the coining of signifiers, is difficult or even impossible for her because she remains an outsider, herself (a) subject to their norms" (71). This idea of woman as outside but nevertheless subject to social norms is something I would like to examine further, for I think it may ultimately be one of the most compelling—underlying—concerns in Haushofer's works.

Distending the Symbolic Order

Although the central theme of the texts—explored by many critics—is clearly the domination of women, a deeper theme may be our relationship to that which is outside social norms: that which is different. Of course, what resists social conformity does not elude the Symbolic Order, but simply distends the particular form it takes at a particular historical time.¹⁸ Nevertheless, given that Haushofer's female characters at least have an inkling of something having been lost through entry into the Symbolic Order, they may be said to have an affinity with what is less socially integrated, especially since they themselves are generally operating in a man's world at the time Haushofer is writing. In *Die Tapetentür* Annette admires Onkel Eugen—

who indeed is one of the few admirable (male) characters in Haushofer's novels. He does not care what people think, but not in the sense that he is indifferent or uncaring. Indeed, callousness and ruthlessness are generally linked with social conformity, with men who are able to use social conventions to their advantage and who fear transgression of the rules that allow them to exploit institutional and social situations. In *Die Tapotentür* Annette says the following of her husband Gregor: "Überhaupt richtet er sich mehr als ich nach den üblichen gesellschaftlichen Formen, die doch für ihn wirklich nur Formen sein können, die man aus Gründen der Zweckmäßigkeit respektieren muß" (67). Onkel Eugen, on the contrary, is considerate and caring as well as non-judgmental and astute. Annette notes that he stands out from those around him and attributes this to the fact that "Onkel Eugen besaß einfach Zivilcourage" (56). Unlike Onkel Eugen, however, most of Haushofer's almost exclusively female protagonists do what is expected of them. They seldom resist expectations and norms. At the same time, however, they question (to themselves at least) social conventions and are distrustful of social conformity. And they reflect on their own compliance. Although the female characters are dominated by male characters who are generally powerful and controlling, they do not deny their own complicity in the existing social order.¹⁹ In "Wir töten Stella," the title already makes clear that the protagonist considers herself culpable in relation to Stella's death.²⁰ Indeed, Haushofer has the extraordinary ability to portray female characters who are and remain severe victims of patriarchal social structures, but nevertheless do not delude themselves about their own complicity in these very structures. Here I disagree with Gürtler, who states: "Die Projektion des 'Bösen' auf die feindliche Wirklichkeit, verkörpert in den Männern, enthebt dabei die Protagonistinnen, nach ihren eigenen Anteilen an der gesellschaftlichen Realität zu fragen, die in der Naturmetaphorik des Textes ohnehin ihrer Geschichtlichkeit und Veränderbarkeit beraubt wird" (162).

The protagonists of the novels generally experience a strong sense of guilt not only in relation to their own complicity, but often simply in relation to their conformity. The character who most explicitly resists social demands is probably the child Elisabeth in *Eine Handvoll Leben*. She is sent to a convent school where she gradually learns obedience—which she equates with cowardice: "Die regelmäßig wiederkehrenden Ausbrüche wurden seltener, und sie erntete von den Nonnen manches erfreute Lob für diesen Fortschritt auf dem Weg zur Bravheit. Aber sie wußte recht gut, daß sie feig war und daß sie niemals und unter keinen Umständen hätte nachgeben dürfen" (43–44).²¹ The same connection between conformity and cowardice is made by the protagonist in "Wir töten Stella": "Es ist wahr, der Mensch kann vieles ertragen, aber nicht aus Gewohnheit, sondern weil ein schwacher Funke in ihm glimmt, mit dessen Hilfe er in aller Stille hofft, eines Tages die Gewohnheit zerbrechen zu können. Daß er es meist nicht kann, aus Schwäche und Feigheit, spricht nicht dagegen" (10).

Perhaps most revealing, however, in terms of the critique of conformity and the intolerance of that which is different occurs in *Die Wand*. As well as attempting to explore an alternative female subjectivity, a specific event near the conclusion makes it

one of the most radical feminist works of fiction that has ever been written. Throughout the novel, the prevailing nuclear disaster is implicitly presented as the outcome of the masculine domination of nature, animals, and humans. Near the end of the novel, when a marauding man attacks her dog (and bullock), the protagonist kills him. The death of the bullock threatens her survival, but her emotional attachment is above all to her dog, Luchs, whose senseless death distresses her and is anticipated throughout the novel. But by killing the man, who is probably the last living human male, the protagonist ends the possibility of the continuity of the human race.²² Her uncompromising and unrepentant deed occurs very close to the end of the novel (Haushofer's longest) and tends to define the work and its reception.²³ As a result, there is a tendency to neglect precisely how the novel ends. In the final sentences, the protagonist writes of going out to feed the white crow. Because it is different, the white crow is not accepted by the flock, and the fact that the novel ends by discussing this anomalous crow suggests that intolerance of difference (present even in the animal kingdom) might be as deep a problem as domination—perhaps even its origin. Indeed, near the end of the novel the narrator has already begun to reflect on the relationship between difference and intolerance and her own ability to transcend her prejudices in this regard:

Und wie fremd sind mir die Insekten. Ich beobachte sie und bestaune sie, aber ich bin froh, daß sie so winzig sind. Eine mannsgroße Ameise ist ein Alptraum für mich. Ich glaube, ich nehme die Hummeln nur deshalb aus, weil ihr flaumiger Pelz mir ein winziges Säugetier vorgaukelt.

Manchmal wünsche ich mir, daß sich diese Fremdheit in Vertrautheit verwandelte, aber ich bin weit entfernt davon. Fremd und böse sind für mich noch immer ein und dasselbe. (251)

Ricarda Schmidt notes that the protagonist of *Die Wand* “erlebt mit den Katzen eine Beziehung, in der irreduzible Verschiedenheit respektiert und als Bereicherung des eigenen Lebens genossen wird” (176). It is true that the cats’ difference is respected and enjoyed as enrichment, but as the above-quoted passage from the text indicates, the “Verschiedenheit” of the cat is not irreducible—the cat is also a mammal; more important, the protagonist realizes that certain differences do seem irreducible to us, and that we have great difficulty respecting them and experiencing them as a “Bereicherung des eigenen Lebens.”²⁴

In *Die Mansarde*, when the protagonist loses her hearing, the fact that she is deaf is seen as more of a problem than the oddity of her suddenly losing her hearing. Her husband is relieved when she goes away, for he is frightened by her “abnormal” condition. Indeed, she herself believes that he would have preferred that she had simply died (rather than become deaf) the night she heard the sirens (96). Moreover, even though she strongly dislikes her mother-in-law, she accepts that her three-year-old son stay with this woman on the grounds that “Eine taube Mutter wäre ja wirklich

nicht gut für ihn" (57). And as mentioned earlier, the protagonist returns to society only when her hearing returns. In general Haushofer's protagonists reflect on the fact that society has little tolerance for any apparent weakness, hence little tolerance for traditionally feminine emotions and attributes. In *Die Tapetentür* the protagonist is distressed that she must continually conceal her fragility, insecurities, and weaknesses from her husband. She says:

Der wirkliche Gregor verabscheute weinende Frauen, und ihr Anblick hätte ihn zutiefst verstimmt. Wozu gehörte man eigentlich dem schwachen Geschlecht an, wenn man seine Schwäche nie zeigen durfte? Tat man es, so konnte man ebensogut hingehen und ins Wasser springen, so gewiß hatte man das Spiel verloren. (142)

In *Eine Handvoll Leben* the unquelled longings and turbulent emotions going on inside Elisabeth encounter little understanding either from her benevolent but insipid husband or from her ardent but insensitive lover. It is worth noting that Onkel Eugen, whom Annette admires in *Die Tapetentür*, does not necessarily behave according to what is expected of his sex or of his class: "Onkel Eugen genierte sich niemals, er küßte sie öffentlich, kaufte eigenhändig Damenwäsche ein, wenn es sein mußte, und einmal hatte Annette ihn in einem ziemlich vornehmen Lokal gesehen, wie er gerade einer älteren, ärmlich gekleideten Frau die Speisen vorlegte" (56).

Overall, I think Haushofer's works suggest that melancholy may be an attempt to preserve faintly *the loss of the early intertwining of desire and its objects* by mourning it, instead of covering it over. Also, melancholy (as a connection to pre-Oedipal desire) may afford those who occupy the feminine position in the Symbolic Order an affinity with what somewhat eludes the symbolic world, hence with that which resists social norms. In reference to *Die Mansarde* Littler states that the novel "is centrally concerned with the themes of repression and the discovery of a symbolic space for that which is excluded from our culture" (219). And in *Die Mansarde* there is an interesting passage that does indeed explicitly suggest that entering the Symbolic Order involves entering a world whose parameters are limited. The protagonist reflects on the fact that we fear and reject what we cannot understand, and suggests that we have thus impoverished the world:

Ich möchte nur wissen, warum es uns beruhigt, wenn alles Böse, Dumme und Schmerzliche, das geschieht, natürliche Ursachen hat. Was ist daran so erfreulich? Ein freundliches Gespenst ängstigt uns mehr als ein widerlicher Mensch, und das ist nicht ganz zu verstehen. Dieses Verlangen nach natürlichen Ursachen muß unserer menschlichen Erzdummheit entspringen. Wenn wir sie ablegen könnten, wäre mit einem Schlag alles möglich. Es ist nicht auszudenken, wie eng und armselig wir die Welt gemacht haben. (83)

Melancholy, perhaps, is a way of acknowledging this narrowness and this impoverishment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would contend that not only can Haushofer's texts be illuminated through psychoanalytic theories of melancholy and desire, but that *these texts can provide us with a more thorough and sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon of melancholy*. Melancholy is a term seldom used today outside of art and literature; instead, we speak of depression, sometimes refining this as clinical depression. But I think we might want to rethink our concept of depression in relation to melancholy. We might want to revive the concept of melancholy not as linked to a bodily humor, of course, and not simply as an unconscious loss or even as a vague, indefinable loss, but as *the mourning of lost desire*. Not only can theoretical writings often helpfully illuminate literary texts, but literary texts can and should help us rethink and reformulate our theories and our concepts. And it seems to me that Haushofer's writings provide us with a new, innovative, and important conception of melancholy as distinct from depression.

Understanding melancholy as linked to lost desire also helps to account for the baffling enjoyment one feels reading Haushofer's generally depressing tales, for the wistful, even comforting pleasure they seem to generate. Fliedl states: "unwillig registrierte man den unerbittlichen Pessimismus, mit dem die Ausweglosigkeit der angeblich wehleidig-neurasthenischen Haushoferschen Heldinnen protokolliert werde" (36). Fascinating is that even as one registers the pessimism and is aware of the "Ausweglosigkeit," the pleasure of the text does not dissipate. This can, I think, also be accounted for with a concept of melancholy as the mourning of lost desire, for although we may not be able to recover this lost desire, the idea that it is being mourned rather than simply forgotten provides us with a connection to it—an awareness that it has not completely disappeared. And again, the melancholy that infuses the text is not simply that of lost desire, but of the time when desire and its object were not so distinct. This is a desire other than the one we now know, but it is one we sense. And we are elated that Haushofer expresses it so acutely in her writing.

NOTES

1. Hugo Caviola refers to the "deeply melancholy language in *The Wall*" (105); Gürtler uses the term "Melancholiesyndrom" (161); and Lorenz states: "Alles Erwachsensein ist für sie nur melancholisches Weitermachen" ("Marlen Haushofer" 177). Fliedl's article is titled "Die melancholische Insel." (It is worth noting, however that Fliedl illustrates the ambivalences running through Haushofer's works regarding

childhood, nature, inclusion, and exclusion. That is, Haushofer counters any strong, singular perspective with an opposing perspective elsewhere, including that of melancholy: “In der Verweigerung der angepaßten Bedeutungen zeigt sich flüchtig der Ansatz eines antimelancholischen Konzepts” [51]).

2. The re-use of names in Haushofer is interesting and has yet to be analyzed I think. Hubert, the name of the male protagonist in *Die Mansarde*, is also the name of Annette’s dead husband in *Die Tapetentür*. And Annette is also the name of the daughter in “Wir töten Stella.” Annette’s friend Meta in *Die Tapetentür* has the same name as the child protagonist in *Himmel, der nirgendwo endet*. The name Luise is used for minor characters in both “Wir töten Stella” and *Die Wand*. Malina is both the name of one of the two male friends who visits Hubert in *Die Mansarde* and the name of a cleaning woman in *Die Tapetentür*. (One wonders if this is the source of Ingeborg Bachmann’s choice of the name “Malina” for her novel of the same name, especially since it is used for a male and a female character who each clearly occupy traditional gender roles.) At the very least, the reuse of names suggests that the characters are intended to be taken as somehow representative.

3. In *Die Tapetentür* Annette is transported back to the wonderful time of her childhood with her dog and her father, but it was this very father who abandoned her and seems to have caused such deep wounds. *Himmel, der nirgendwo endet* comprises the childhood of the young girl Meta, making clear that childhood is hardly a time of insouciance.

4. Johann Lachinger discusses the “gesellschaftliche Ungebundenheit der Großstadt” (209) and states: “Für Marlen Haushofer wurde das gesellschaftliche Isolationsyndrom zum entscheidenden Thema” (208). He draws a parallel between the isolation portrayed in Edward Hopper’s paintings and Haushofer’s *Die Tapetentür* and *Die Mansarde*.

5. The feminist dimension of Haushofer’s works has been explored especially by Littler, Lorenz (“Marlen Haushofer”), Venske, and Venter.

6. Maria-Regina Kecht puts it well when she states: “the protagonist searches for a space of her own while at the same time collaborating with the construction of her object status” (130).

7. Uwe Schweikert’s article addresses the transformative potential of the style of the novel in the following terms: “Man kann sich [...] von ihrem begütigenden Gebrauch der Sprache so sehr ins Herz der Erzählung, ins Zentrum der Schrift locken lassen, daß man plötzlich selbst mit dem Subjekt des Textes zu einem Wir verschmilzt” (19).

8. *Eine Handvoll Leben* does seem to be the one work in which the protagonist pursues her desire by breaking out. But the protagonist’s thoughts at the conclusion of the novel make clear that it was certain circumstances, not her own desire, that permitted her pursuit of freedom: “Sie wußte jetzt auch, daß sie niemals geflüchtet wäre, hätte ihr Vater damals noch gelebt. Niemals, solange er am Leben war, hatte sie sich aus dem freiwilligen Gehorsam gegen ihn begeben” (153). Moreover, she does

not feel she really gained independence. On the next page we find: “Wie immer sie ihr Leben gelebt hätte, heute würde sie auf diesem Stein sitzen, mit dem Verdacht im Herzen, den falschen Weg gegangen zu sein. Das Leben war einfach zu stark, um bewältigt zu werden” (154).

9. Jonathan Scott Lee writes that “successful mourning mourns not only the object lost but also the human condition of castration” (118).

10. See Lee’s excellent discussion of Lacan’s reading of *Hamlet* (112–22).

11. In her biography of Haushofer, Strigl also notes that she was very sensitive to noise and that after an illness she went deaf for a time, then regained her hearing in one ear (*Marlen Haushofer* 306).

12. The way in which the motifs of *The Iliad* constitute “Wir töten Stella” is examined by Thomas Lorenzen in “Initiation und Verrat: zitierte und verborgene Motive antiker Texte in Marlen Haushofers Novelle ‘Wir töten Stella.’”

13. That sirens or water creatures embody the cultural representation of the fear and longing of (male) desire is, of course, taken up in Bachmann’s “Undine geht.”

14. Elke Brüns’s interesting article “Die Funktion Autor und die Funktion Mutter: Zur psychosexuellen Autorposition Marlen Haushofers” outlines how Haushofer’s novels portray the tension between—indeed ultimate mutual exclusion of—woman as mother and woman as desiring subject. Whereas *Die Mansarde* and “Wir töten Stella” can be said to involve a retreat into motherhood, and *Die Tapetenür* and *Eine Handvoll Leben* a rejection of and flight from motherhood, Brüns convincingly analyzes *Die Wand* as distinct in its radical attempt to portray a “Veränderung der Mutterfunktion” (37).

15. Both Tabah (190) and Strigl (“Gegen die Wand” 80) draw attention to the fact that the metaphor or image of a wall is used to depict loss in *Eine Handvoll Leben*: “Eine unsichtbare Wand hatte sich zwischen sie und alle Dinge geschoben und ließ ihre Sinne ertauben” (137). The wall is also an important image in *Himmel, der nirgendwo endet*: very early in the novel it already intrudes between the young child Meta and her ardent longing:

Unter ihrem Bösessein weint das Verlangen nach Mamas kühler Wange, nach ihrem dunklen Zopf und dem Duft, den er ausströmt.

Ganz langsam wächst eine Wand zwischen Mutter und Tochter auf.

Eine Wand, die Meta nur in wildem Anlauf überspringen kann. [...] Verzagtheit überfällt sie und läßt ihre kleinen Arme lahm niedersinken. Die Wand ist wieder ein winziges Stück gewachsen. (15)

16. In “Wir töten Stella,” Richard is only attracted to Stella after the tailor has made her some “attractive” clothes and the protagonist has told her she is beautiful, in other words, after she has been encouraged to perform her gender and is more ensnared by the signifier.

17. Brüns sees Haushofer as having a radical “Autorposition,” “die sich genau aus der Unterdrückung eines weiblichen Begehrens und aus dem Versuch, dieses doch zu artikulieren, ergibt” (26).

18. An innovative and compelling interpretation of the political dimension of a Haushofer text that seems to be concerned mainly with interpersonal relations is to be found in Irmgard Roebing's "'Wir töten Stella': Eine Österreicherin schreibt gegen das Vergessen."

19. Even Hubert, who seems far less dominating than many male characters, is accustomed to getting his way. *Die Mansarde* begins almost humorously as we learn that almost every Sunday morning the protagonist and her husband awaken and have a "discussion" about the various things they could do that day. And almost every Sunday, after the lengthy and protracted discussion, they agree to go to the Arsenal (the war museum in Vienna), where Hubert wants to go.

20. Karin Fleischanderl seems to miss the subtlety and ambivalences in Haushofer's works when she states: "**Ihre weiblichen Personen hingegen sind Unschuldslämmer**" (49). Strigl's "Nach Strich und Faden" more than competently responds to Fleischanderl's *Verriss*, especially by showing where Fleischanderl has simply misquoted texts. Fleischanderl's simplistic reading misses the subtlety and complexity of Haushofer's works—which hardly lend themselves to generalizations. For example, in *Eine Handvoll Leben* the protagonist depicts the "weibliche Welt" as lacking laughter: "Keinesfalls aber wünschte sie [Betty] in einer weiblichen Welt der Nützlichkeit und Vernunft zu leben, in der es zwar keine gigantischen Kriege, keinen Hunger, aber auch nichts mehr zu lachen gäbe" (103–04). But in *Die Wand*, when the protagonist imagines being able to laugh, it is by being together with another woman: "Wenn ich mir heute einen Menschen wünschte, so müßte es eine alte Frau sein, eine gescheite, witzige, mit der ich manchmal lachen könnte. Denn das Lachen fehlt mir noch immer sehr" (66).

21. Being a "good child" and following the rules is depicted thus: "Elisabeth wurde, von kleinen Unregelmäßigkeiten abgesehen, ein braves Kind. Sie fing an zu lügen und zu betrügen und wurde fast eine Meisterin darin. Jetzt begriff sie nicht mehr, warum sie sich so lange gegen die Macht der Regeln und Gesetze gewehrt hatte" (*Eine Handvoll Leben* 50).

22. In his article "Marlen Haushofers Roman *Die Wand* als écriture féminine," François Venter argues: "Was *Die Wand* im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes subversiv macht, ist nicht die Tatsache, daß in der Erzählung eine Frau einen Mann tötet, sondern die Tatsache, daß auf einer erzähltechnischen Ebene zwei der Grundprinzipien des patriarchalischen Denkens als künstliche Konstruktionen entlarvt werden—das der Sprache als Teleologie und das der Teleologie und Kontrolle überhaupt" (65). This accords with my suggestion earlier in this article that *Die Wand* presents an alternative form of subjectivity.

23. Roebing makes the following interesting observation: "Erst dieser letzte trennende Akt setzt bei der Ich-Erzählerin den Schreib-Entschluß frei. Schreiben—so wird deutlich—ist weder möglich im Zustand absoluter Unterordnung unter den Mann und seine Gesetze und Zuschreibungen noch im Rückzug auf eine vorzivilisatorische Welt undifferenzierter Allverbundenheit" ("Drachenkampf" 305).

24. It is interesting, as Roebing notes, that in Haushofer's last novel, *Die Mansarde*, the protagonist draws insects, reptiles, and birds, but no mammals ("Drachenkampf" 315). At the conclusion of the novel, she does draw a dragon, perhaps the most foreign creature, but also the most human one insofar as it has sprung from human imagination.

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