

Morbidly Eloquent:

The Disease Lyric and the
Elucidation of the Ill Experience

by

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for james patrick joseph

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My first ‘thanks’ goes to Joseph Daily. Three years ago, he submitted a poem “i saw the dead preying” to the University Students Against Cancer (USAC) art gallery which I just happened to attend, which just happened to trigger my interest in the topic of poetry as therapy, and which just happened to make my Honors Thesis. I truly admire you and your work.

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[illegible]

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Abstract

Gillie Bolton said, "There are ducts other than tears." The therapeutic potential of poetry and the emotion duct were the impetus for this thesis.

I begin this thesis by introducing possible reasons why people find it difficult to write about illness, and if they do write about it, reasons why they may keep this material private. I utilize William Wordsworth, John Donne and Emily Dickinson to summarize the history of the lyric poem, and to establish three poetic qualities – which are further explicated by close examinations of eight contemporary lyric poets – which I assert define the disease lyric, a genre of poetry which has not been sufficiently studied.

The first chapter uses the poetry of Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall to define and compare the different uses of the lyric and narrative modes. Both make use of the narrative mode, but Hall balances delicately the two. Hall's preference for lyric mode ultimately prevails, and he composes poetry in the form of letters to communicate with his deceased wife. Cancer was a pervasive part of this married couple's life, and their disease poetry illustrates this unfortunate, yet captivating, bond.

Jane Yolen found it necessary to write daily about her husband's radiation treatments using a series of forty-three sonnets. Despite the limitations the sonnet introduces – rhyme scheme and line amounts – Yolen felt the control she had over the poems was essential for her to overcome the myriad of obstacles and emotions that accompanied caring for her ill husband. Macklin Smith, besides being poetically silenced by leukemia for years, discovered inconsistency in form embodied his emotional reactions. Contrasting two seemingly polar-opposite poets, the disease lyric's quality of accessibility develops in this chapter.

The outward form of poetry is examined further using the work of Joseph Daily. A repeated cancer survivor, he produces poetry with the largest variation and most unconventional of form. Repetition is the major element in his work, and he uses the repetition of sound (rhyme), words, and structure to create a feeling of urgency and exigency, the desire to be heard. Daily substantiates the importance of sharing this type of poetry publicly.

Serious interpretation of three children's poetry – that of Mattie, Madeleine, and Daniella – expands the limits of the disease lyric genre and culminates in the consideration of a modified Freudian Dream Theory: The outward form of a poem represents its manifest content, and through the interpretation of manifest content, a poem's latent (emotional) content is revealed.

This exploratory essay suggests a new genre, provides a way in which to read and interpret the disease lyric, and recommends social change in order to achieve an increase in its propagation, legitimacy, and popularity.

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Introduction

In her essay “On Being Ill,” Virginia Woolf introduces to us the ever-present and challenging feat of expressing one’s feelings – to the idea that “People write always of the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come into it,” – to the loss and longing for words that every person has experienced at one time or another due to the limitations of language¹. She writes:

“...To hinder the description of illness in literature, there is the poverty of language. English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache...The merest school girl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry.” (*MO* 11)

To elucidate this ‘poverty of language,’ consider the process of studying a foreign language as an example: Since translating is not a perfect science, we often find that we must translate ideas, and not words. The words that different cultures necessitate are variable, as are the words that different emotions engender. That is, different languages have different ways – and at times no way – of conveying exactly what we are attempting to express. Love, sadness, hunger, exhaustion and anger are all ubiquitously described emotional or physical states. However, feelings that arise with illness, disease, and death are more linguistically challenging.

One reason for this nebulous nature of such topics is that illness has been variously described across time, age, race, gender, religion, and culture. For instance, the linguistics of

¹ Virginia Woolf. *The Moment and Other Essays*. “On Being Ill.” Harcour Brace Jovanovich. San Diego. 1948. Hereafter cited in this text as *MO*.

modern medicine have changed significantly (and will change perpetually) due to shifts in the logistics of treatment. Ever-changing, too, is the language used to describe pain and anxiety resulting from disease. This conundrum makes it difficult for writers to produce and readers to interpret disease literature. While the pain one feels as a result of a disease may be the same another feels, the two may express their experiences completely disparately. In other words, one's inability to write about illness – to generate and convey a feeling eloquently and accurately – may simply be due to a rhetorical limitation.

This rhetorical constraint is compounded by the fact that our culture deems some topics more appropriate to write about than others. Certain subjects such as rape, sex, abhorrence, and illness are taboo to talk about publicly and are often withheld to one's personal domain, or if shared, are disclosed to a few. Moreover, in a society where the majority of the population is theistic, people are provided with a venue – organized religion – in which to communicate their most personal concerns with a spiritual being, and I believe this cultural phenomenon to be most applicable to those suffering with an illness. People keep disease and its physical and emotional ramifications to themselves, writing privately in journals or seeking reprieve through prayer. Despite the general restraint, some feel compelled to publish written work on this topic, and it is to these people that I turn. I trust that writing about and desiring to share such information is so innate, that I find it, as Woolf believes, “strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature” (*MO* 9).

There exist numerous explanations as to why people may not write about their own illness. The poverty of language and the proscribed nature of illness are only two potential reasons. More obvious is that disease can simply be too debilitating. The physical act of writing and the mental processing of disease require energy, energy that may not be readily available to

the terminally ill. Woolf, thus wages that if one is going to, or is able to, write about illness, that poetry is the best form in which to dedicate one's time simply because of the extended time it takes to write and read prose. She says, "Indeed it is to the poets that we turn [since] illness makes us disinclined for the long campaigns that prose exacts. We cannot command all our faculties and keep our reason and our judgment and our memory at attention while chapter swings upon chapter" (*MO* 18).²

Dr. Arthur Lerner, author of *Poetry in the Therapeutic Experience*, believes as I do that, "Poetry is the response of our innermost being to the ecstasy, the agony and the all-embracing mystery of life. It is a song, or a sigh, or a cry, often all of them together."³ In other words, when an emotion is much too complicated to clarify in a few words, the only way in which to capture and represent it is by writing on the experience that birthed such an emotion. This process of preserving emotional reactions through the documentation of the brief time in which they commonly exist gives rise to lyric poetry. Lilia Melani validates my definition of the lyric poem when she says, "Lyric poetry makes its impact in a very brief space and...stresses moments of feeling."⁴ In this thesis, I dedicate myself to those that use the lyric form to describe an experience with illness.

Writing is undeniably a therapeutic process, and people for centuries have recognized this, using poetry as their medium. William Wordsworth, Romantic lyric-poet connoisseur, in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, defined poetry as "The spontaneous overflow of feeling" (Mazza

² I wish I could express the state of apprehension in which I first found myself when wanting to claim that poetry, and at times only poetry, allows us to delve into the most vulnerable parts of our lives, parts in which other genres of literature are less capable. But now, with Woolf on my side, I can confidently say that in coping with illness, poetry is a, if not the, medium in which to do so.

³ Perie J. Longo "Poetry as Therapy." 12 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.spcsb.org/advoc/poetrytx.html>>

⁴ Lilia Melani. "Reading Lyric Poetry." 23 Sept. 2001. Department of English, Brooklyn College. 7 Nov. 2005 <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/read_lyr.html>.

4). It was the Romantic lyricists who repeatedly wrote down these emotionally copious moments and, in doing so, immortalized them. Robert Langbaum uses the term “epiphanic mode” to describe the moment when feeling or insight about human experience comes suddenly into focus” (337). This mode is best represented by lyric poems written by the poets of the Romantic era. In fact, this was so common by the Romantic lyricists that Professor Marjorie Levinson of the University of Michigan has developed a theory using lines from a Wordsworth poem, *The Solitary Reaper*⁵:

“Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of today –
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?”⁶

In the quatrain’s final line – signified by the switch from the past tense to the future tense, especially including the comma which lies between these two – we can see how a lyric poem represents a brief yet specific moment in time. This moment is the present which exists in the gap between the previous moment and the immediate next, between past and future. Wordsworth does not write, “What has been, is now, and may be again.” Levinson theorizes that this empty space is a temporal space, one that a lyric poet, whether romantic or contemporary, presents to us and allows us to engage in. We are invited to climb inside, recreate, and interpret this space. Poets that write about illness, probably more than most lyric poets, want us not to only inhabit this space, but to sympathize and empathize with them in this space, and the best way to achieve this is to leave their poems feeling or understanding what it is that they have had to endure.

⁵ Levinson, Marjorie. “Literature 1600-1830.” Perlman Honors Common G421B, Ann Arbor. 19 Oct. 2005.

⁶ Wordsworth, William. “The Solitary Reaper.” *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Ed. Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch. Oxford: Clarendon, 1919.

John Donne, for example, found it necessary to write the poem “Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness” eight days before his death (193). Here are the first three stanzas of this poem:

Since I am coming to that holy room
Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy music; as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I must do then, think now before.

Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
That this is my southwest discovery
Per fretum febris, by these straits to die,

I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;
For, though their currents yield return to none,
What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the resurrection.

Donne approaches death, “that holy room of eternity,” with acceptance for he trusts it to be the only way to God (Campbell 192). This poem portrays illness as a casual and traditional expedition; it is a series of trials and tribulations, with physical examinations and a diagnosis / prognosis. Donne’s physicians tell him he will die “through the straits of fever,” translated from the latin phrase “*Per fretum febris*” (Norton Anthology). Since Donne was considered one of the most passionate preachers of his time, it is to no surprise that the process of death is not mysterious and that he, as he wants us to, anticipates the afterlife with “joy”. Donne delivered a sermon called “Death’s Duell,” which has been referred to as his own funeral sermon, so it is conjectured that “God My God, in My Sickness” was intended to be, if it was not actually, “Thundered...from the pulpit of St. Paul’s [Cathedral]” (Campbell 194). Donne is a prime example of the importance and desire to share one’s struggle with illness.

Contrasting with the social John Donne is the reclusive Emily Dickinson⁷. It is common knowledge that Dickinson's poetry was published posthumously and while she was alive she kept her poetry, and thus her identity, secluded. As a result, scholars are only able to speculate reasons why she led a cloistered lifestyle. A plausible hypothesis, based on the information provided in a biographical article written by Margaret Freeman, is that Dickinson feared the public would not receive her poetry well. To prove this, Freeman tells us that after reading an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled "Letter to a Young Contributor," which was written by the magazine's literary editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson and which proffered advice to aspiring writers, Dickinson periodically sent poems from her collection to him, beginning a lifelong correspondence. However, puzzled and intrigued by the "unorthodox nature of her poems," Higginson advised her to delay publication. As a result, Dickinson wrote that publishing was "foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin—" and never again sought to publish (Freeman).

There exists another aspect Dickinson's life which many people believe led to her elusive silence. It is thought that Dickinson suffered from iritis/uveitis, an inflammation of the eye layer carrying the fine muscle that controls pupil size, blood vessels, and nerves (Hirschhorn & Longworth 303)⁸. This disease "made the glare of light painful and necessitated the avoidance of light and thus reading" (Freeman). To her distant relative and friend Joseph Lyman, Dickinson later wrote:

"Some years ago I had a woe, the only one that ever made me tremble.

It was a shutting out of all the dearest ones of time, the strongest

⁷ And it is not only in their sociability that these two poets differ. While both use variations of hymnal meter, Donne's language is more traditional, and Dickinson sounds modern. The importance of this choice in language will be explained later in this introduction.

⁸ Norbert Hirschhorn, Polly Longworth. "Dickinson's Medical Conditions." *The New England Quarterly* 69.2 (1996): 299-316. Hereafter cited in this text as *H&L*.

friends of the soul—BOOKS. The medical man said avaunt ye books
tormentors, he also said ‘down, thoughts, & plunge into her soul.’ He
might as well have said, ‘Eyes be blind’, “heart be still’. So I had eight
weary months of Siberia.” (Sewall 76)

In addition to this disease of the eyes, Dickinson suffered from a fatal kidney disease, both of
which are believed to have led to her reclusive lifestyle (H&L 299).

Regardless of Dickinson’s reasons for which sharing her poetry publicly, thanks to her
persistent sister, who had her poems published after her death, we do know that she “Wrote each
of her poems with specific events or meanings in mind, and may well have written some to
reflect her state of health” (H&L 300). The following poem may be one of them:

As One does Sickness over
In convalescent Mind,
His scrutiny of chances
By blessed Health obscured—

As One rewalks a Precipice
And whittles at the Twig
That held Him from Perdition
Sown sidewise in the Crag

A Custom of the Soul
Far after suffering
Identity to question
For evidence’t has been—⁹

It is understandable that a woman who endured a debilitating eye disease – one that threatened
her eyesight and the one pursuit with which she always found personal comfort – would refuse
most visitors, spend much of her time in her bedroom, and write a poem about how illness

⁹Emily Dickinson. “As One does Sickness over.” Poemhunter.Com. 9 Mar. 2006
<<http://www.poemhunter.com/p/m/poem.asp?poet=2053&poem=160450>>

challenges and changes identity. Dickinson believed that once "One does Sickness over"¹⁰, "one will question his identity because sickness "evidences" it, elucidates it, makes it clear to the mind (Webster).

My object in my thesis is to examine the poetry of eight authors whose experience with the written word varies as much as their experience with illness: Jane Kenyon, Donald Hall, Jane Yolen, Macklin Smith, Joseph Daily, Matthew Stepanek, Madeleine Alston, and Daniella (whose last name is not disclosed). The above excerpts from Wordsworth, Donne, and Dickinson already establish three poetic features that draw these eight contemporary poets together, despite the difference in their respective struggles: (1) the prevailing lyric mode over the narrative mode, (2) the disparity or similarity in form (within one's poetry), and (3) how this leads to varying amounts of manifest and latent content.

Within the terms of this thesis, one will only need to understand the lyric and narrative modes in their most basic senses, as the expression one's feelings / emotions or the telling of a story, respectively. The majority of this thesis will be dedicated to the examination of the poetic form and the traditional (and sometimes untraditional) literary devices that the poets employ – such as rhythm or meter, rhyme, repetition, fixed form, etc. – and the rhetorical criticism they invoke. For example, if I were to analyze the reason Wordsworth used iambic tetrameter in *The Solitary Reaper*,¹¹ I would say that he found this conventional and popular meter to be most appropriate when representing his experience. Donald Ryan puts eloquently when he writes, "The calm simplicity of the scene, the plaintive nature of the song, the sacred thrill of his discovery are captured in the swing of the lines...the rhythm is related to the theme" (391). In

¹⁰ The word 'over' means "from beginning to end" according to "An American Dictionary of the English Language" published during her lifetime.

¹¹ While this poem is not about illness, it can sufficiently show what I mean when I say examining form will result in the illumination of a poem's formal rhetorical contributions.

other words, the poem's manifest content provides us room in which to interpret one's psychology at the time of writing the poem.

Dickinson exemplifies the difference between manifest and latent content. These terms I borrow from a Freudian dream theory, where manifest dream-content is defined as the information retained in the memory in comparison with the latent dream-content which can only be obtained through (psycho)analysis (Merrill 169). These terms, for the purpose of this thesis, are synonymous with outward form / utilized literary devices and interpretation, respectively. Dickinson is known for her careful use of language. By vigilantly considering the etymology of words, Dickinson facilitates interpretation of her layered poetry's multifaceted meanings.¹²

In no way is it possible to analyze the complete works of all eight of the aforementioned poets, but instead I will use a sample of each poet's work to provide evidence for the three poetic features which I believe wed them. I will rely on and explain some theoretical models only as certain issues arise. Furthermore, the majority of the poetry I use comes from archives which would not commonly be recognized as part of a legitimate literary canon: unpublished poems, poetry written by terminally ill children, and poems published posthumously. In other words, this will be an exploratory essay hoping to coin a new term, a new poetic genre – the disease lyric.

¹² Consider, for a moment, the term "cytoxin," a cancer medicine, which Macklin Smith uses in his poetry. If broken up into two parts, we see another way to read this term – "sigh toxin." This homonym-like technique can be seen in the chapter discussing Joseph Daily.

Re-viewing the Narrative and Lyric Modes

Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall

Jane Kenyon wrote hundreds of poems, published seven books, and earned the title of poet laureate of New Hampshire. However, while ill with leukemia, which would eventually kill her, she wrote but one poem about her illness. Jane Kenyon is a prime example of how illness can silence even the most prolific of writers.

In the Afterword of her final book of poems *Otherwise*, Kenyon's husband, Donald Hall, tells us that during her illness, "[Jane] could not write because an anti-rejection drug disabled her fingers" (218). In fact, only one of the twenty new poems, entitled "Eating the Cookies," came after the diagnosis of her illness (219). While we know that Kenyon was inspired to publish poems about others' illnesses (she also wrote poems about her husband's two-time struggle with cancer), we are now aware that she could not write of her own leukemia due to a physical restraint.¹

When the couple was designing Kenyon's posthumous book, Hall suggested "that each of [Jane's] friends could add one poem that [she] had omitted, and [Jane] liked the idea, which made her closest friends part of the selection process" (Hall, *The Best Day the Worst Day* 245)². The poem Hall wanted to include was unfinished, and Jane, known for her incessant revisions, was apprehensive. However, Kenyon gave him permission to print it only if he could "Find a way to print it as an unfinished poem, and say so..." (*BDWD* 245). Hall tells us:

¹ Many of her published poems are misinterpreted as being related to her leukemia. However, a majority of these poems are written about her struggle with depression.

² Donald Hall. *The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon*. Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005. Hereafter cited in the text as *BDWD*.

“She started [this poem] in March of 1995, back in New Hampshire before the leukemia returned, but she did not survive to finish it. On March 8th, with Jane slowly improving, I left her for eight hours. Our friend Mary Jane Ogmundson stayed with her, and Jane dictated a draft of “The Sick Wife.” Typed, it lay on a reading table beside her chair. On several occasions, she dictated a revision, and a new draft replaced the old. She would have made more changes if she had lived.

I put it here [in the Afterword] as her last word.” (*Otherwise* 219-220)

Jane died six weeks after the first draft of “The Sick Wife.” Thanks to Hall’s promise, we fortunately have this poem:

The Sick Wife

The sick wife stayed in the car
While he bought a few groceries.
Not yet fifty,
She had learned what it’s like
Not to be able to button a button.

It was the middle of the day—
And only mothers with small children
Or retired couples
Stepped through the muddy parking lot.

Dry cleaning swung and gleamed on hangers
In the cars of the prosperous.
How easily they moved—
With such freedom,
Even the old and relatively infirm.

The windows began to steam up.
The cars on either side of her
pulled away so briskly
That it made her sick at heart.

Kenyon's poem, written in third person, tells the story of a woman who, incapacitated by her illness, is incapable of accompanying her husband during a routine trip to the grocery store. Instead, she must sit in the car where she is forced to observe the "prosperous" (the healthy and mobile) people around her, which ultimately uncovers her feelings of self-pity and envy. Because of its story-telling quality, this poem is inarguably a disease narrative and not a disease lyric. We must, then, ask why Kenyon, who we know is writing autobiographically, would give preference to the third-person narrative. Considering the emotional and physical ramifications of a terminal illness, we can say she records her traumatic experience in this way in order to escape it – even if it is only momentarily. In other words, by writing about her personal experience with illness as if she was not the one enduring it, Kenyon is able to better cope with the reality of her situation. I call this narrative-method dissociation, and it can be defined as a psychological defense mechanism in which specific, anxiety-provoking thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations are separated from the rest of the psyche.

In using the narrative mode, Kenyon also creates a poem to which we can compare lyric poems. Lilia Melani believes the speaker of a lyric poem is "the most important element of all." She explains that every time we read a lyric poem, we use the speaker as an "agent of revelation."³ She describes the basic events of a lyric-poem revelation as follows: "The speaker has an experience, responds to it with feelings, and comes to understand the meaning of the events or objects he or she describes" ("RLP"). Furthermore, she believes that we as readers can "do the same," meaning we can identify with the poet ("RLP"). While I am sure Kenyon was aware of the valuable rhetorical effects writing in first person can have – the use of "I" makes the

³ Lilia Melani. "Reading Lyric Poetry." 23 Sept. 2001. Department of English, Brooklyn College. 7 Nov. 2005 <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/read_lyr.html>. Hereafter cited in the text as "RLP."

poem actually feel as though the poet's events are our own, allowing us to sympathize and empathize directly with the poet – her dissociative writing style provides us with a unique and candid interpretation of her experience.

While Kenyon writes a successful and strong poem, we cannot learn much about the disease lyric by studying her. However, we can look at the life and poetry of Donald Hall as a transition into this topic. Hall wrote two startling books, one of poems, *Without*, and the other a memoir, *The Best Day the Worst Day*, about the shared struggle through Kenyon's leukemia. Interestingly, before Jane was diagnosed with leukemia, Hall also suffered from two bouts of cancer. He tells us:

“I dropped all sorts of things after the first cancer. I dropped a huge prose project that would have taken me at least five or six years to do, taken me away from poetry. I gave up editorships and other activities, peripheral to writing, which I had enjoyed earlier. I re-wrote *Remembering Poets into Their Ancient Glittering Eyes*, which I had been intending to do for some time, but which I had put on hold. My second cancer was supposed to kill me. I concentrated on writing poems. Then I concentrated on taking care of Jane...then on writing out of my bereavement.”⁴

In this quote, Hall validates the urge and the importance of writing about illness and the finitude of time that illness imposes. He confirms that it was only “after the first cancer” that he felt motivated to write, reaffirming the silencing effect of illness and that it is more common for the

⁴ Donald Hall. Interview with David McDonald. *The American Poetry Review*. Jan.-Feb. 2002. 30 Jan. 2006. <[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\)qa3692/is_200201/ai_n9078981/print](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi)qa3692/is_200201/ai_n9078981/print)>. Hereafter cited in this text as *DM*.

severely ill to write retrospectively. After regaining health, Hall realized his mortality and knew it was necessary, in order to compose more quickly and prolifically, to rid himself of activities that would hinder his writing process. After his second cancer does not kill him, he designates even more time to writing poetry. Undeniably, Hall had much practice writing about illness prior to caring for and writing about his wife.

In his book of poems and in his memoir, Hall revisits the last days and moments spent at his wife's bed side. The organization of *Without* is unique to this book of poems; he does not utilize this format in any of his other works. The way in which the book of poems is organized is interesting for, in the first half, Hall walks us through a series of lyrical poems that follow the progression of Kenyon's disease. Hall elaborates, "The ordering of the poems is largely chronological...The first half of this book is largely the narrative, and [the poems] were begun close to the event that they describe."^{5, 6} After her death and burial, events that are apparent in the poetry, the poetry's form transforms: The latter half of the book is written using a series of epistolary poems, letter poems, written to Kenyon by Hall after her death.

In addition to being divided into halves, *Without* has nine titled poems (seven are written in first person). Each of these poems are followed by anywhere from one to twelve untitled poems, are all written in third person, and are collectively entitled "Her Long Illness." The entire sequence of letter poems and the concluding poem, "Weeds and Peonies" – which is not a letter poem but is similar in tone – are written directly to Kenyon and, as expected, are written in first person. (However, I believe letter poems serve a disparate rhetorical purpose than the lyric poems that come before them. I will elaborate on this later in this chapter.)

⁵ Donald Hall. Interview with Judith Moore. *Poetry Daily*. 1998. 30 Jan. 2006.
<<http://www.poems.com/halinter.htm>> Hereafter cited in the text as *JM*.

⁶ We cannot ignore his use of the word "narrative." In fact, while Kenyon separated herself completely from the lyric form, Hall balances delicately the lyric and narrative mode.

One may ponder why it is that I pay so close attention to the organization and representation of this book: I believe Hall has presented his work in this way in order to resurrect and preserve his wife. With his series of poems, Hall captures moments of Kenyon's life, and in combining them, tells the tale which she was unable to tell. For example, before discovering "The Sick Wife," I found Hall's alternation from first to third person puzzling. However, after reading her poem, I understand that Hall uses the narrative mode (a form which before *Without* he rarely used when writing about Kenyon's death)⁷ to mimic Kenyon's dissociative writing process. Hall explains:

"Everything in my life after Jane's death comes, one way or another, out of Jane's Death...One of the major goals of my writing...has been to preserve the past and pass it on." (*DM*)

"In the second half of [*Without*], written after she died, it was as if I were writing for two. As if I were learning from her." (*JM*)

Providing a few examples of Hall's poetry will explicate this process of borrowing to learn and imitate.⁸

1⁹

"Dying is simple," she said.
"What's worst is...*the separation*."
When she no longer spoke,
they lay alone together, touching,
and she fixed on him
her beautiful enormous round brown eyes,

⁷ Within the next few pages, reference will be made to Hall's poem "The Old Life" which has identical form and content to the poems in *Without* but is written only in first person.

⁸ Take note that the numerical values I will assign to each poem do not exist in Hall's work; they will serve as reference numbers for the subsequent pages. These are but seven parts of the poem "Her Long Illness."

⁹ Donald Hall. *Without*. New York: Mariner Books, 1999. Hereafter cited in the text as *WO*. Poems 1-4 are included in this collection of poems.

shining, unblinking,
and passionate with love and dread.

2

One by one they came,
the oldest and dearest, to say goodbye
to this friend of the heart.
At first she said their names, wept, and touched;
then she smiled; then
turned one mouth corner up. On the last day
she stared silent goodbyes
with her hands curled and her eyes stuck open.

3

Leaving his place beside her,
where her eyes stared, he told her,
“I’ll put these letters
in the box.” She had not spoken
for three hours, and now Jane said
her last words: “O.K.”
At eight that night,
her eyes open as they stayed
until she died, brain-stem breathing
started, he bent to kiss
her pale cool lips again, and felt them
one last time gather
and purse and peck to kiss him back.

4

In the last hours, she kept
her forearms raised with pale fingers clenched
at cheek level, like
the goddess figurine over the bathroom sink.
Sometimes her right fist flicked
or spasmed toward her face. For twelve hours
until she died, he kept
scratching Jane Kenyon’s big bony nose.
A sharp, almost sweet
smell began to rise from her open mouth.
He watched her chest go still.

With his thumb he closed her round brown eyes.

There exist notable differences between Kenyon's poetic form and the form of Hall's poetry: the alternating series of short and long lines and indentations Hall uses compared to the straight-edged left justification in Kenyon's poems. Despite these differences, one cannot deny the similarity of the poets' tone and perspective. In fact, if I take a stanza from Kenyon's poem and apply Hall's choice of poetic form, the two poet's works are practically indistinguishable. Take Kenyon's first stanza as an example:

The sick wife
stayed in the car while he bought
a few groceries.
Not yet fifty, she had learned
what it's like
Not to be able to button a button. (*Otherwise*)

Hall's borrowing of his dead wife's voice and form ensures her post-mortem survival. His poetry – his gesture – serves as a commemorative. In many ways, when reading *Without*, it is as if we are reading poetry written by Kenyon herself. In other words, Hall does what Kenyon, due to her illness, was incapable of accomplishing. Hall adds:

“Let me tell you something that's not in the book that just tears in my heart. When I quit teaching and [Jane and I] moved... critics who have reviewed me in recent years, have tended to say one thing, they say that ‘Hall has been publishing for a long time...But Hall started to get good when he quit teaching and moved with his second wife, Jane Kenyon, to the family farm.’ And I feel a little abashed by my old poems, but I do think that all my best work has been written since I came here. I was 47 years old when I quit teaching...which is the age Jane was when Jane died. Isn't that horrifying? I mean she was

infinitely better at the age of 47 than I was at the age of 47. Maybe she
would not have gotten better, but you have to think.” (JM)

To further support the idea that Hall borrowed his dissociative writing style from Kenyon, we should look to his previous writing. In doing so, we learn that the form used throughout the first half of *Without* – the series of short and long lines – is one with which Hall was familiar. In his book of poems *The Old Life*, Hall uses this exact form to write a ninety-six page poem, also entitled “The Old Life.” There does exist, however, an important difference between the poems of these two books. The last two segments of “The Old Life” read:

Blueberry bagels
And the *Globe*. We walked in our daily fields
Ignorant of the moment
But knowing that grass would collapse
One day into oblivion.
Every three months a Hitchcock
Tech drew a titre
Of my blood; a week later the phone rang
With numbers to water
The green meadow or burn it away.
Together we worried
Over my days remaining until
On a Monday Jane’s
Nose bled. By bedtime, oxymoronic
Poison dripped murderous
Reprieve into her blood’s white water.



Back at the motel, after
All day by her bed, I walked up
And down, talking
To myself without making a sound, staying
Clear, and made a slip
Of the tongue: “My life has leukemia.”
(*The Old Life*)

The Old Life was published in 1996, and I think it is fair to assume that Hall began work on this book before this time (it was in 1993 that Hall published *The Museum of Clear Ideas*; *The Old*

Life came next). Jane wrote her poem in 1995. *Without* was published in 1998. It is not out of the realm of possibility, then, that Jane wrote “The Sick Wife” in-between the time Hall wrote “The Old Life” and his poems for *Without*. This allows us to rightfully assume that Hall finished “The Old Life” using the first person, read Jane’s “The Sick Wife” in which she used the third person, and, feeling inspired by Jane or thinking this dissociative writing style to be effective, wrote the poems for *Without* borrowing Jane’s style. Whatever prompted Hall’s use of the third person, it is undeniable that a definite shift in the perspective in Hall’s poetry took place during the two year interval between *The Old Life* and *Without*.

Besides helping Hall cope with her death and preserving Kenyon, the intertextuality between his work and Kenyon’s helps the reader coalesce the two sides of their story. Melani agrees when she says, “[T]he experiences of reading are cumulative. We can build on them. Because “texts” absorb and reflect each other, the more we read, the richer can be our experience....”¹⁰ The topic of disease is flagrant in much of Hall and Kenyon’s work, and not just disease in the physical sense. Hall reveals, “There was considerable happiness with Jane-but also there was depression, downers, not bad times between us but bad, bad times. And then the cancers” (*DM*). In their entire life story and when reading their poetry, illness – mental and physical – is the tangible adhesive that kept and continues to keep the two together.

It is not only amid Hall and Kenyon’s poetry that intertextuality exists, though. Throughout *Without* and *The Best Day the Worst Day*, Hall uses repetition of imagery and phrases (which further develops the couple’s tragedy). Adrienne Rich – feminist poet, teacher, and writer – formulates an interesting theory that applies perfectly to Hall’s work and provides us with another purpose for his use of intertextual repetition. Rich describes writing as re-vision.

¹⁰Lilia Melani. “Lyric Epiphanies and Lyric.” 17 Aug. 2000. Department of English, Brooklyn College. 7 Nov. 2005. <<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/epiphany.html>>.

She writes, “Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—...is an act of survival” (35). This is similar to what I initially thought to be the motivation for writing about illness publicly: selfish therapeutic writing. It is Rich that takes it one step further and describes not only as therapeutic but necessary for survival. Hall confirms this when he says:

“When I wasn’t taking care of her...I loved taking care of her” (*DM*)

“I was writing. That was the only thing that could take my attention. I continually wrote about the illness...I didn’t – couldn’t – imagine how I could live without writing a book. It was the only reason to get up in the morning.” (*JM*)

Hall published his book of poems three years after the death of his wife and his memoir ten years after her death. He published not only because it helped him cope with her death, but helped him ensure his survival. So, we can say Hall wrote to literally guarantee his survival and to assure Kenyon’s continued figurative existence. Also, ending his book with the letters – more recent than the narrative poems – signifies his ultimate preference for the lyric form.

Rich’s claim that each time we look back on something, each time we re-read or re-enter an old text, we do so with a new set of eyes, that we may see things we may not have seen during our first encounter, is intriguing. Memories are clips of psychological text, and often times when we re-visit memories, we modify them. With time, we may include detail we had not originally remembered. On the contrary, time can also introduce a lack of memory and we must edit to make sure our recollections are accurate. In other words, we continually revise our memories. Thus, Rich’s “re-vision” does not only mean “re-seeing” something but also means “re-writing.”

Hall complements Rich's theory when he says, "Because *Without* was constructed out of wild loss and screaming, and because I knew it had to be made into art if it were to reach anyone else, I felt more than ever that I needed the help of others" (DM). He continues by explaining an elaborate revision process which includes sharing each poem with at least twenty of his friends in order to revise most effectively. This proves that he worked incessantly on certain poems and, without a doubt, did much "re-seeing."

Because of this extensive re-vision process, one can notice the repeated reference to Kenyon's eyes in all of the poems above. Not only does he make reference to them, he refines the image of them. Isolating these descriptions will help us to better see what Hall does. In poem 1, Jane's eyes are "...beautiful enormous round brown..., / shining, unblinking, / and passionate with love and dread." In poem 2, her eyes "...stared silent goodbyes...and...stuck open." In poem 3, they "...stared... open as they stayed / until she died...", until Hall "closed her round brown eyes." in poem 4. Hall remembers these eyes even after Kenyon's Death; the image of Jane's eyes appear in "Letter to Washington," one of Hall's letter poems in the second half of *Without*. He writes:

Letter From Washington

Sitting in a swivel chair,
wearing slacks, blazer, and a tie
among distinguished patrons
and administrators
of the arts, I let my eyes shut
for the flash of sleep
required to get by. "Proactive"
had become the leitmotif
of discourse. When I woke,
I wrote these lines on a pad,
hoping I appeared to be taking
a dutiful note, as in, "Always
remember: *Remain proactive.*"

If a councilor glared at me,
I looked downward quickly.
I was there; I was elsewhere,
in that room I never leave
where I sit beside you listening
to your altered breathing,
three quick inhalations
and a pause, I keep my body
before your large wide-open eyes
that do not blink or waver,
in case they might finally see
—sitting beside you, attentive—
the one who will close them. (*WO*)

It is the last five lines that speak directly to the four aforementioned poems, and this repetition must signify something Hall wants to tell us, wants us to figure out. In fact, Hall's personal poetic philosophy is: "A good poem must have multiple levels. I resist the word 'meaning.' Levels of intelligence, imagination, sensuality, motive, especially feeling together with counter-feeling. A poem without internal contradiction is not a poem" (*DM*).

In order for us to appreciate why Hall writes what he does, let us analyze this repetition using elements of his own philosophy. Rhetorically, the way we are forced to fixate on Kenyon's eyes through the visible repetition parallels Hall's own fixation on his dying wife's eyes. One's eyes, almost always visible, are probably the most sensual organ. (Even at a distance, the eyes are capable of communicating a variety of things: seduction, love, and pain, sadness to name a few.) Kenyon's brown eyes are probably the only bodily attribute not to be altered physically by chemotherapy. For this reason we can imagine the difficulty Hall must have endured watching his wife deteriorate but the solace he must have found in knowing that in her eyes he could always find the woman he married. And while the moment when Hall must close his wife's eyes for her verges on sentimentality, its motive is to pack an emotional punch, and because after reading these poems we know these eyes as well as Hall, it does so

successfully. Furthermore, Hall's visual tactic of repeating the words/phrases that describe Kenyon's eyes is full of wit and contradiction. Hall's choice to publish the letter poems seems contradictory, for the world is able to read Kenyon's letters, personal documents meant to be sent to / read only by Kenyon. It is ironic, not contradictory, that Kenyon will never see these poems overflowing with literal and figurative visual imagery.

In fact, in his memoir, Hall informs us that "speaking goes first and seeing next, but hearing continues close to the end" (*BDWD* 253). Possibly, it is for this reason that after Kenyon's death Hall finds it necessary to write a series of letter poems. Hall's letter writing "can be traced to Freud's practice of using correspondence as a therapeutic tool" (Mazza 20). Letter writing as therapy can be used to aid in dealing with physical distance (Mazza 20). Hall provides us with a motive as well:

"The letters I didn't plan. I just began the first letter. Everybody who has lost someone has had the same experience. A few days after the death something happens. You find out a new bit of information. And your first thought is, 'Oh, Jane will like to hear this.' Things happened and I wanted to tell her about them. And at that time, I talked to her at the grave a lot, and I talked to her pictures back here...It...did me good to talk to her. And to write to her, and to address her...and to tell her...what I remembered of our life together." (*JM*)

One thing is for certain: It is Hall's letter poems that are full of the liveliest language and are the most emotionally / personally sincere of Hall's poems. It seems unfortunate and paradoxical that it is only after Kenyon's death that he writes about "what [he] remembered of [their] life together" (*JM*).

It is in the following inspirational excerpt from Hall's memoir that his work culminates in his unique poetic prose, lyric-narrative style, and retrospective repetition. When reading the following selection, refer back to his poems above and notice how he has composed with compassion:

"I think she understood me; speaking goes first and seeing next (she never asked for her glasses now), but hearing continues until close to the end...At noon as I prepared to leave Jane for a minute, I said to her, loud and clear, "I'm going to put these letters in the box." She answered, in a matter-of-fact tone, as if speech were no problem, "Okay." Such as it was, it was Jane's last word...I held [a bound galley of *The Language of Life* with its full-page picture of Jane] up before her. Now her hands emerged from the covers and remained clenched at the level of her ears. Many years ago a friend had given Jane a china figurine, a Greek goddess whose hands were clenched and raised where they must once have held a spear or staff. The friend said the goddess made her think of Jane, and now Jane's clenched, raised hands resembled the goddess's. Jane's breathing altered into a Cheyne-Stokes rhythm. She took three short breaths, a pause, and then a deep breath, her breathing controlled by the surviving stem of the brain...After the Cheyne-Stokes breathing started, we knew it would not be long...Her wide brown eyes seemed bigger than ever; she did not blink. Rarely, one of her clenched fists flicked in the direction of her face; just in case, I scratched her nose. In the darkness of eight

o'clock, I leaned over her to kiss her once more, a light or fleeting kiss, and was astonished when her lips puckered and budged to peck me back. I don't believe that a peck is autonomic...In the morning...Jane's breathing altered again, from the Cheyne-Stokes rhythm to a series of rapid pants. I remembered sitting beside my grandmother Kate, dying at ninety-seven, when the quick panting began. I watched Jane's chest move, shallow breaths, and never took my eyes away. Motion stopped. No pulse, no breath. With my thumbs I pulled down the lids of her brown eyes." (*BDWD* 253-255)

Life Lines
Jane Yolen and Macklin Smith

The most important feature of the disease lyric, or writing about disease generally, is its accessibility as a therapeutic form: The lyric is an all-encompassing, natural paradigm. I have already introduced two poets, Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall – both professional writers – that used poetry (and, more specifically, the lyric or variations thereof) to write about their own and each other's illnesses. However, their personal history and life together (both having been diagnosed with cancer, both having acted as each other's caregiver, and both being poets prior to their illnesses) may have made poetry an obvious therapeutic outlet. However, Jane Yolen – renowned children's books author – found solace in writing a series of forty-three sonnets, one for each day her husband received radiation therapy for cancer.

Yolen's description of the night after her husband's first radiation treatment, the start of her book *The Radiation Sonnets*, is one recounting epiphany:

“I went upstairs after I tucked [my husband] in, after I knew he was safe...When I got upstairs, I just sort of sat there, and suddenly this poem came out, um, in a rush, in rhyme, in sonnet form. Most of my writing I go ov¹er and over and over, and this just came out.”²

In the introduction to her book, she explains this moment of revelation similarly, “I did not choose the [sonnet], it chose me” (Yolen viii). Moreover, while Yolen says she loves “formulaic poems” – poems that require fixed rhythm, rhyme, or structure – she, previous to that particular evening, had not written a sonnet since college. (This amatory form is the most appropriate, as

¹ Jane Yolen. *The Radiation Sonnets*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2003. Hereafter cited in the text as *RS*.

² Jane Yolen. Interview with Diane Rehm. *The Diane Rehm Show*. 30 Oct. 2003. American University Radio. WAMU 88.5 FM, Washington, D.C. 30 Oct. 2003. < <http://wamu.org/programs/dr/03/10/30.php> >. Hereafter cited in the text as *DR*.

well, for this book of sonnets – whose subtitle is ‘For My Love, in Sickness and in Health’ – was dedicated to Yolen’s husband). The first night, she wrote:

Day 1: A Promise to Eurydice

Do not go, my love—oh, do not leave so soon
Familiar halls and rooms that know your touch.
I want another April, May, and June,
I want—oh still the wanting is so much.
What—forty years gone by? Why need we more
When those before us fill us both with dread?
Oft times I see you staring out the door
As though you’re longing for the path ahead.
We go then, hand in hand, into the deep,
Each day a visit to the blank machines.
Those promises we made we mean to keep,
By these mechanicals or other means.
And if alone you chance that endless track,
I’ll bring you home, without once looking back. (RS)

Yolen’s habit of writing daily (even before her husband’s illness, she described herself as the “kind of writer that writes everyday”) introduces us to the concept of journal writing (DR). Used in poetry therapy, “Keeping a diary, log, or journal is another...tool that serves to provide a vehicle for individuals to express thoughts and feelings in a meaningful and personal way. It can also provide some element of control to clients as they try to sort out difficult feelings...” (Mazza 20). While Yolen does not use formal journal writing, her practice of writing a sonnet a day shares many qualities with this common therapeutic form.

The element of control Mazza describes is probably the most important characteristic of Yolen’s daily diversion. As a caregiver,³ Yolen said she “had no control over anything except food and tucking [her husband] in” (DR). However, when writing sonnets, she said, “I had some control over at least fourteen lines. I call them ‘life lines’ actually” (DR). This ability to consistently

³ Unlike Hall and Kenyon, Yolen (and her husband) had no previous experience dealing with cancer. She was unable to empathize with her husband as Hall and Kenyon could with each other and, going into the experience blindly, was unable to predict what each day would bring.

control an aspect of her life may have helped her escape the “high [level] of interpersonal and intrapsychic [tension], ... the long litany of mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, frustration, helplessness, sleeplessness, lowered morale, and emotional exhaustion (Brody 20) that are commonly associated with the experience of caring for frail or dependant family members (Nuttall 92). The content of Yolen’s sonnets supports this claim, allowing her to work through some of these potentially harmful psychological side-affects. Here are a few examples:

Anxiety:

Day 10 – A Little Sleep

A little sleep, a little death,
This first exhaustion frightens me.
I watch, I count each shallow breath,
My prayer a short soliloquy.
You fight the feeling, stay wake,
Your eyes the faded blue of fall,
Refusing for the prayer’s sake
To contemplate a nap at all.
This foolish fight is yours to lose.
Just close your eyes, let all pride go.
A moment’s sleep’s no loss to choose;
I wonder that you feel it so.
Just for a little while please sleep
And like an angel, watch I’ll keep. (RS)

Hopelessness/Emotional exhaustion:

Day 18 – Letting Go

A friend drove you today, I did not go.
An ache remains, a pinprick in my breast,
Reminding me just what I ought to know:
The caregiver, as well, still needs her rest.
You laughed with him along the long highway,
He promised that he’d volunteer for more.
I gave him tea, we’d things enough to say,
But deep inside me some unknown piece tore.
Yet in this first pained time we’ve been apart
I sensed, my dear, an infinite rehearsal”
A gap, a hole, a pinpoint in my hear,
A space for which I fear there’s no reversal.

Then help me, love to sight an let you go,
If terror, time, and tumor make it so. (RS)

Frustration:

Day 39 – Food Wars: Fourth Front

You who are sixty just turned six:
You dissemble, deceive, eat half, call it whole.
Soon you will dump the contents of the bowl
As part of your latest bag of tricks.
I'm mother now, measuring, making you eat,
Counting the sips, teaspoons, doses, bites.
Your half smile diffuses all our fights,
As you whisper the magic word, "Replete."
I who never resisted you cannot now learn;
I set the soup before you, then move away,
Hoping a stronger hunger on another long day
Will bring you to table, will help you return
To find the miracle that fine food brings,
Along with salt, sex, and other good things. (RS)

Yolen found that she cried only three times during her husband's radiation, that "[She] needed to hold [herself] in tightly to get... through... difficult days ... that the battle rarely leaves room or time for mourning..." (RS ix-x). In her attempt to stay composed, Yolen was able to use the "compressed form" of sonnets to see and hear her emotions for the first time. With each line she composed, she found herself commenting, "This is how you're feeling. This is how you're feeling" (DR).

It is quite paradoxical that Yolen found comfort in having control over a form of poetry that, having a specific formula, is itself limiting and controlling. It is also pleasantly surprising that within such a consistent and constricting form the themes and types of emotions vary so significantly. Yolen elaborates:

"The sonnets not only reflect what happened on a particular day, they also chart my mood at the time. So some of the poems are prayerful, some angry, some despairing, some silly, some full of hope. They

speak of naps and nausea, of hair loss and weight loss, of family visits,
of friends who volunteer to help, and even of the wrong guidance we
received about [my husband's] diet." (*RS* viii-ix)

The quest for rhyming words and counting syllables must have posed an intellectual challenge that counterbalanced the psychological surges of emotion Yolen endured each day.

Yolen's journal-like pursuit also gave her the opportunity to talk about death in a private space. She tells us that before the cancer, she and her husband talked about death, joking about who had to go first and why, until they came to face "the real thing," after which the death conversations ceased (*DR*). However, after re-reading the poem, "A Promise for Euripides," we see Yolen makes many allusions to and has thoughts about death from day one: "...do not leave so soon...We go then, hand in hand, into the deep...longing for the path ahead...if alone you chance that endless track..." (*RS* 1). We should pay attention to Yolen's clever reference to the tragic Greek myth of Orpheus, the god of music. In this story, Orpheus's lover Eurydice was bitten by a serpent, died, and went to Hades. Orpheus was so desperate to be back with Eurydice, he traveled to Hades where he preformed a song expressing his desire to have Eurydice back. Hades was so touched that he granted Orpheus the right to bring Eurydice back to Earth under one important condition: Orpheus was not to look back as they ascended. He was to trust that Eurydice was immediately behind him. And as Orpheus and Eurydice had almost finished their long trek home, he looked behind him to ensure she was still with him. She instantly returned to Hades, where she stayed for eternity (Podd). Because Yolen's husband was "too involved with what was going on in his body," she kept her fear of the taboo topic of death from him, and it was through indirect reference to death and the opportunity to write privately

that Yolen seized the ability to silently voice her anxieties (*DR*). In fact, her husband would refuse to read her work until years after his radiation sessions ended.

By exploring a form she did not typically use, one that chose her, Yolen was able to “think about [her] life in ways that [she] had never thought about before” (*DR*). This increased sense of awareness guided Yolen through the taxing forty-three days of radiation. She says:

“...I was looking at the days and thinking about the kind of shape that a day might have. That I’d never even given any thought to before. I think...many people go through their lives day by day without giving any thought to what that day was like...I have never been a journal writer, and maybe journal writers have a better idea of the shape of that day, but I didn’t, and suddenly I became aware that each day has a form of its own, distinct from the day before and the day after.” (*DR*)

It was this observation that led Yolen to stray away from the type of literature she was most comfortable writing: her published poetry has been “for children or for genre publications or...performance poems, meaning...they read well aloud” (*RS* viii). Some days were a bit more physically and emotionally demanding than others, and Yolen, as a result, wrote poems that mirrored the shape of the day on which they were written and that varied in their ‘performance’ or ‘private’ potential. In fact, Yolen’s original intention for this poetry was for it to be read / heard by family only. However, after sharing it with friends, she was convinced to publish it thinking it “might help other people.” And her poems have been doing exactly this.

Shortly after the publication of her book, Jane Yolen appeared on the Diane Rehm’s radio show to discuss her book, and during one segment in the show, people were allowed to call in or

email questions and comments. What they shared expressed the accessibility of poetry during illness and the benefit of sharing such personal material:

For Brandon of Lana, Maryland, *The Radiation Sonnets* brought to his attention the emotional turmoil his wife may have endured during his struggle with cancer. He realizes, "In five years, I never asked her what she went through..." (DR).

In an email, Mary shared her personal connection with poetry. She wrote, "My use of poetry [was] an escape [from facing the death of my daughter]...By repeating [poems] to myself, sleep came more easily" (DR).

Reminiscent of Donald Hall, Yolen enlightens us with a story of a woman who wrote her husband letters every day for a year after he died "just telling him how she felt" (DR).

Elizabeth from New Jersey told Yolen, "While I wasn't a poet, I wrote [a] diary everyday [to cope with my dying sisters spreading cancer], to stay focused." to which Yolen responded, "You don't need to be a professional writer... [Writing is a] personal therapy to go on" (DR).

These people are real and, more importantly, have found consolation through the written word. However, they all, including Yolen, were physically independent of the diseases with which they had been emotionally afflicted. For the ill, as we saw with Jane Kenyon, writing is not always an initial thought or an initial ability. Macklin Smith, who battled leukemia, primarily focused on "facing death, staying alive, and being alive."⁴ Smith's process of writing, specifically when he felt motivation to write, differed greatly from the process of the aforementioned people, polarizing the ill-afflicted and the ill-affected on the basis of when each finds it necessary to write.

⁴ Macklin Smith. *Transplant*. Ann Arbor: Shaman Drum Books, 2003. Hereafter cited in this thesis as *TP*.

Jane Yolen found writing to be “something positive to look forward to at the end of each day...something for [her],” and found it necessary to write daily (*DR*); however, Macklin Smith says:

“I didn’t write a single poem in the hospital. After the diagnosis, I just went birding...trying to experience domestic and professional life to the fullest. People told me I should write, and I told them to fuck off (not really, but that was not my interest at all). Also, I rarely write as a matter of choice. [My poems] just come. I have to be in the mood. I wasn’t in the mood [when I was sick], I was scared shitless.”⁵

In the Acknowledgment of his book of disease poems, *Transplant*, Smith reiterates, “Transplant took me by surprise. I hadn’t intended to write these poems; in fact, I had no desire to write anything about the procedure during and for a long time after it.” This temporal dichotomy between Yolen and Smith, between the ill-afflicted and the ill-affected, is remarkable. Despite the accessibility of the lyric form, Smith found that during his illness, words and poetry (with which, as a professor of literary poetry, he had much previous experience) were at most times both undesirable and inaccessible.

For Yolen, a sonnet’s strict form provided her with a sense of control during turbulent times, but did not limit the emotion she conveyed. Likewise, Smith’s book, comprised of more than seventy poems, each unique from the next on the basis of form, has a variety of poems because of the topic / emotion the poem is transmitting. Smith’s assortment of form allows him to experiment with many topics, especially those that he believes, “Disease poets typically

⁵ Macklin Smith. E-Mail interview. 17 Feb. 2006. Hereafter cited in the text as *SI*.

neglect or sentimentalize.”⁶ For Smith, who argues that “you can’t separate form from meaning,” this method of breaking away from formulaic poems – in the words of Yolen – allows him to complicate his message in a way that mimics his grappling with the many issues cancer introduces(*SI*). Smith puts it more eloquently:

“Different forms have different embedded ideas...The key for me was to mix up the forms to imitate the edgy erratic experience. I wanted some prose, not just verse, even, and pieces that combined prose and verse. There are even a couple of poems with footnotes, to suggest multiple levels. I got the idea of double titling from the multiple titling used by George Herbert and Louise Gluck, but double titling to suggest chimeric reality, the thing with the DNA. The last poem ends with lines that end with the letter Y-- another kind of form.” (*SI*)

Smith uses the term ‘chimeric’ to explain his preference of a panoply of form as opposed to dedicating himself to one or two different types of poems (like that of Hall and Yolen). And not only does this term refer to the variety of form, but refers to the complexity of each poem, that each poem is “composed of parts of different origin.”⁷ Smith is aware of the relation of the term ‘chimeric’ to DNA, meaning DNA is comprised of many molecules from different origins. In his poem “One Year Out,” Smith uses the word ‘chimera’ which is “an individual who has received a transplant of genetically and immunologically different tissue”⁸. In other words, since

⁶ This quote, in discussion with Macklin Smith, refers specifically to his poem “Angela” in which he grieves over impotency and loss of his fertility. The irrational lust to which he admits is a perfect representation of Smith’s unyielding honesty.

⁷ “Chimera.” Def. 1. *The American Heritage® Stedman's Medical Dictionary*. 12 Feb. 2006. <www.dictionary.com>

⁸ “Chimera.” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. 12 Feb. 2006. <www.dictionary.com>

Smith received a bone marrow transplant, he is a chimera. Thus, Smith's chimeric lyric poems are mimetic representations of himself.

Now that we have established how Smith fits into this literary genre of disease lyric poetry, allow us to take a closer look at how *Transplant* came to exist. We know that the poems were not readily accessible to Smith, that it took more than remission to give him enough confidence to write about his disease. He said that as the poems came, they made him feel extremely emotional, that it was as if he was "reliving some of the experiences" (SI). He says the process was therapeutic, that he felt "oddly vulnerable again, yet safe, deeply sad and yet full of gratitude" (SI). Smith also told me:

"[Writing poetry] also made me feel very useful because I knew that I had thoughts and feelings which, if successfully communicated, would not only help other people through dark times but also save their asses, literally. Oh, it also made me feel like a vehicle. There is a Muse, and she was sitting on my shoulder often during that period." (SI)

At first, Smith had reluctance to write; however, when he was finally mentally prepared to revisit his illness, it gave birth to poems like those of other authors we have seen and poems that only could have resulted because of his unique experience with leukemia.

I find it best to begin by examining the poems with forms that the poets we have previously studied have used. For example, Smith utilizes the sonnet, which he describes as "love poems or complaint poems or praise poems," to write "That Time of Year" and "Murre Eggs" (SI). Of the two, I will include only the latter:

Murre Eggs

Unlike the black-and-white adults, they're bright,
Alone, and pyriform. They wait their part.

Had Jackson Pollack [held]⁹ them in his sight,
He might have feared that nature copies art.

The egg-collector finds an unmarked white
Rarely. As he dangles on his long rope,
He sees an ecru splashed with madder, light
Cobalt green, a gold flecked maroon. His hope

Is vertical and brief. They in their shape
Stay put, or circle in on the thin ledge
If a wind rise. Nor do their marks escape
The murre who left them fog-bound at the edge.

We turn in circles too. Sometimes it's wise.
We learn to reckon and be recognized.

Like Yolen, this sonnet represents the control Smith had over the poems that “came against all [his] will at first” (*TP*). In other words, the sonnet was the necessary form to use when Smith needed to feel that he was the one in control of the poems that were coming uncontrollably.

Smith also varies the length of lines in many of his poems. Smith does this to stimulate and control the pace of the poem while reading, altering the reader's level of anticipation. According to Smith, “Short lines are tense or depressive; long lines are manic or confused or lazy-daisy.” Notice in the following poem how Smith uses short and long lines in a way that resembles the form Donald Hall uses in the first half of *Without*:

*They may not admit it, and they may not even remember
it afterwards, but everyone, everyone on this ward
knows clearly at some moment that they are going to die.*

My whole life history nothing but
White fluids
Sperm mile leukemia pus
A beef stew
Pot teeming with August maggots
My body
Sheathed in an inch of yellow pus

⁹ Since publishing this poem, Smith has desired for this word to be “held”; previously, the word here is “had.”

The heart
Drying like a condom on a dirt road

This poem, written to gloss the quote from his social worker,¹⁰ has some interesting artistic qualities. Smith's choice of a title of such extreme length is intriguing for it reads so differently than the body of the poem. In this long title, Smith uses punctuation which is completely absent in the poem's body. The commas in the title make us read slowly, emphasizing the seriousness of the language. The repetition of the word 'everyone,' especially because of the comma that divides the two, adds a tinge of drama while reading it. The title has only long lines, which also slows down the pace at which we read it, and accentuates the shorter lines and the white space (which matches the color of the fluids being discussed) below it. The body of the poem, lacking punctuation, is read quickly and without any disruption. The lack of commas in the list of white fluids in the third line makes these fluids mix as if they are a single amalgamation. The purposeful absence of a period at the end of the poem makes us feel as though the thought continues, as if the poem never ends. The language of the poem is graphic and unpleasant which also increases the rate at which we desire to read. The short lines read more quickly than the longer lines, acting as pedals that increase the speed and velocity of the poem. One can see that if such a form is used consistently – as Donald Hall does through the majority of his book – the poems will seem to expand and contract as if they are organs, breathing and beating.

While it is impossible to list each poetic device Smith is implementing in his disease poems, it may be beneficial to examine some common trends in his poetry to gain a better feel of how Smith contributes to the genre. He writes long poems and short poems, poems comprised of solely questions and answers, poems of prose and verse, poems with lengthy footnotes, and poems written in the form of letters (remember Hall's series of letter poems.) Smith explains

¹⁰ This information is revealed in the poem "Despair." It reads, "...What did he make of that / poem with the long title where I quote the social worker? Well okay, / misquote..." (TP 72).

that his use of couplets is to craft duality; tercets create an “odd man out” or some tension; quatrains are useful for the resolution of a theme.

We can best see Smith using many of these elements in his poem “Call and Response.”

*Call and Response*¹¹

Why me?¹
Why not?²

This short poem is anything but simplistic, and is a primary example of how one lone couplet – though these two lines do not rhyme, they do form a complete thought insofar as the second question answers the first, forming a complete syntactic unit – crafts duality (OED). Smith is impressively able to further complicate these two lines by using a question to answer a question which strays from the more literal “Q and A” form he usually utilizes in this type of poem. Interestingly, the tone of these two lines also differs, representing how this could be an internal conversation within Smith himself or a conversation between two separate individuals. Either way, this poem expresses the importance of personal and interpersonal consultation after being diagnosed with a terminal disease (fittingly, this poem is included under the “Diagnosis” segment of *Transplant*).

This poem also displays Smith’s use of footnotes, his experimentation with unconventional form, and the “multiple layers” he hopes to accomplish. These multiple layers represent the multiple physical and emotional levels an individual with cancer will experience. And it is in the footnotes that Smith, in the stream of a poet’s consciousness, interprets these loaded questions:

“¹This question complains: ‘Why [is this happening to] me?’ or ‘Why me [instead of someone else]?’ Only some weeks after the immediacy of a cancer scare could such questions be expected to resolve into meditative inquiries on generation or incarnation. Nevertheless, poets get cancer, so to speak. Philip Larkin in ‘The Old Fools’ regroups

¹¹ The superscripted numbers are part of the original poem.

quickly from his revulsion at the vacant-mouthed and messy senility of the very old to voice his appreciation for life's fresh miracle:

It's only oblivion, true:
We had it before, but then it was going to end.
And was all the time merging with a unique endeavor
To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower
Of being here. Next time you can't pretend
There'll be anything else.

For George Herbert in 'Vertue,'^{op.cit.}, the very sweetness of natural vitality implies annihilation, and yet his doom is not absolute:

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridal of the earth and skie:
The dew shall weep thy fall no night;
For thou must die.
Sweet rose, whose hue angrie and brave
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye:
Thy root is ever in its grave
And thou must die.
Sweet spring, full of sweet dayes and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie;
My musick shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.
Onely a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives;
But through the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

²This question is no less rhetorical. It proclaims the speaker's resignation to the disease, if not his death; it claims no special immunity due to character or circumstance: 'Why not [me]?' Nevertheless, poets revise. A speaker resolved to fight his cancer and affirm his generated or incarnated existence would reject the not-me and not-ness of personal annihilation." (TP 10)

In the first footnote, Smith illustrates how one can draw upon the poetry of others to find consolation and help find an answer to those uncontrollable, self-inflicted, and overwhelming questions that are introduced into a newly diagnosed cancer patient. Smith takes a risk in mentioning selfishness, increasing the sincerity of his character and confidently representing all aspects, real and taboo, of illness.

In the second footnote, we see Smith immediately questioning the integrity of his second question, the seemingly natural and automatic response to the first. After taking a moment to explicate this reaction and realize that asking one's self this question is the same as "personal

annihilation” or surrendering to the disease, Smith revises his response by stating that if one is to “fight his cancer,” then he must not ask himself this question.

It is not only in the form that Smith’s poems vary, for the particular tenses in which the poems are written fluctuate as well. Given the fact that Smith wrote this book in its entirety years after the actual events about which he writes occurred, we would expect many poems to be written using the past tense. However, this is not the case at all. Smith speaks to this temporal inconsistency:

“First I was just writing the poems, but as I began to put them together in book form, I realized that there were some things about time that the poems could suggest, in particular, how our ‘normal’ (not necessarily accurate) habits around time are warped during the experience of disease. The past and future fade into an anxious present, a bad meditation, and then suddenly hope and fear focus on various possible futures, including death, etc. Time becomes volatile. I realized that the poems themselves had different temporal perspectives. Some were lyrics that tried, say, to capture (remembered) experience in time present but were concerned about the immediate future (getting home). Others were past-tense narratives about the hospital experience from a perspective of much later. There were also lyrics with narrative memory and vice versa...I consciously ordered the poems into a roughly chronological sequence...but within those parts let stand, and actually tried to increase, all sorts of temporal inconsistencies.” (*SI*)

Transplant is organized into five sections: Diagnosis, On Hold, Hospital, Home, Remission. However, despite this chronology, Smith informs us that within these sections, the poems do not necessarily follow the exact progression of his illness. Unlike Hall and Yolen who found they wrote everyday during their spouses' illness, Smith wrote only retrospectively, trying to remember how he felt at individual moments during the illness. Because of this reflective and introspective writing process, Smith has created poems written using the present tense about past events in which he looked to the future. This convoluted chronology entangles us as we try to make sense of when each poem, or its idea, originated. Smith's temporal randomness and myriad of forms allows the poems to coalesce into a uniquely documented struggle.

Repetition: A Relapsed Literary Device

Joseph Daily

When reading any poem, and especially when reading disease lyric poetry, we must ask ourselves whether the poem is meant to be read by others and if it is to be read aloud. Macklin Smith told me:

“Some people might think of anyone who writes about his own illness as a confessional poet, so maybe that's my tradition...I write for myself, and I write for other cancer patients, and I write for poetry lovers. I want to publish to satisfy my ego, so that other patients can read the poems, and so that poetry lovers will have access. My poems don't have audiences when they are being written at the outset, by the Muse, but as soon as I start revising them I am aware of an audience of other people. Isn't that why we write, to communicate? I think the Muse wants us to get out of our egos, to access deep truths, and share these truths. It's a very Romantic view of poetry, isn't it?” (*SI*)

Once again, I am struck by the frankness with which Smith talks about his work. However, his honesty is to be appreciated, for all the poets we have looked at thus far have strived to share their work, even if, as in Yolen's case, that was not their original intent. For the ill, it appears to be important that others understand them. And despite the “very Romantic view of poetry” that Smith mentions, the poets discussed thus far are all composing selfish therapeutic poetry begging to be heard.

The poetry of Joseph Daily, a recent graduate of the University of Michigan, probably exemplifies most explicitly this lyric characteristic. His poetry occupies two unpublished,

stapled, makeshift books. However, when their thin cardboard covers are opened, the reader enters an austere and lonely yet captivating world. Daily's poetry is undoubtedly the most sullen of any of the other poets I have come to know. In the process of reading his work, I find myself incapable of resisting turning the pages even though I repeatedly ask, "Why read on if his words are so extremely pessimistic and morose?" And it was not until I had the chance to sit down with Daily that the realization and the explanation of this pervasive pessimism became apparent. Daily said to me while we sat together over a cup of Starbucks coffee:

"I [think] of myself more as "honest" than "morose" or "sullen," but I think those terms kind of amuse me at the same time, adding to the unique quality of my writing or setting it apart from what others are doing in the same mode...It is flattering that you see good poetry and not this [pointing his fingers inward at his chest, at himself]."¹

Despite his cancerous state, Daily is producing eloquent poetry.

Additionally, like the poetry of Macklin Smith, Daily's experiments with a striking array of form. However, the element of internal repetition (repetition within a single poem, not repetition between poem content or form as that of Hall and Yolen) is an integral aspect of many of his poems. He repeats punctuation, words, lines, and stanzas, all of which engender dissimilar, yet unified, motives. Of all his poems, "write what you know" epitomizes this concept of using repetition purposefully:

, write what you know
, write what you know
, write what you know

know that what you write
won't do you any good

¹ Joseph Daily. Personal interview. 22 Sept. 2005.

write what you know,
write what you know,
write what you know,

wish i didn't know
the things i know
but
i'll write it anyway

so others
will understand what it's like
to have :

- a needle in the hip
- a lung collapse
- an IV drip
and - a second relapse

,
,
,

Versed
take me from A to B
and help me forget what happened
along the way²

Like most of his poems, this one toggles between a pessimistic and optimistic voice and introduces us to the struggle that Daily so eagerly wants or needs us to know and understand. In this poem, Daily uses repetition and punctuation, and combinations of the two, in order to solidify and mold sound and to control how a reader views and hears his poetry.

When I first read this poem, I did so in silence. However, I noticed the poem became more effectual when read aloud. This poem begins with a comma, which could easily be ignored when read silently. When read aloud, though — especially when read to another or to a group of individuals — this comma introduces a sense of urgency and hesitancy even before the first word

² Joseph Daily. *girls on chemo*. 1st ed. Flushing: Self Published, 2001. Hereafter cited in this work as *GC*.

is read. Usually, the comma is a symbol of silence, instructing us to pause, take a breath, to ponder what we have read, and to anticipate what could come (based on the words before it) when we continue reading. However, by placing the comma at the start of each of the first three lines, Daily gives the comma sound, as if we should read it, “COMMA write what you know/COMMA write what you know/COMMA write what you know” (GC). The commas are so prevalent that the repeated command “write what you know” is almost a whisper, an afterthought to the comma’s scream. The commas’ sounds seem to crescendo with each repetition, ingraining them into our mind and imploring us to hear them as we continue reading, so much so that when we begin line 6, we anticipate and miss the sound of the commas at the beginning of each line. As a result, the set of commas that now come at the end of this repeated command now act as an echo to the first and probably should not be read aloud.

This is visually stimulating as well, for the repeated phrase and commas act as mirror images of one another. This reflective strategy is utilized another way within stanzas one and three, the “write what you know” stanzas: the result of stacking the words “write,” “what,” “you,” and “know” is the same as if you were to place yourself between two mirrors with the reflective sides placed parallel to one another. If placed just right, your image is infinitely reflected. Daily combines sight with sound to create a unique three-dimensional space in which this poem exists and its echoing message can reflect and survive.

The rhetorical effect of repeating the word “know” – this word appears in nine of the first ten lines – cannot go unnoticed. We must ask ourselves why Daily, after stating “know that what you write/won’t do you any good,” still composes this poem, still “write[s] it anyway” (GC). One possibility is that writing accomplishes the goal asserted in his statement in the fifth stanza, “so others/will understand what it’s like,” with the word ‘it’ referring to his pervasive experience

with cancer. Repeating the word “know” creates a pleading tone, one of desperation. He does not want us to simply know that he has, among other things, had to endure “a needle in the hip, a lung collapse, an IV drip, and a second relapse,” but he wants us to understand. What is the difference between knowing and understanding? Is there more relief in the statement “I understand” than in “I know”? Our greatest responsibility here is to ask ourselves, “Does isolating these words – know, know, know, know, know, know, know, know, know, understand – express Daily’s exigency for writing?”

Exigency, the state or quality of requiring much effort or immediate action, is captured well by the placement and usage of commas in Daily’s work. Rhetorically, repetition can heighten the exigency of a situation, especially when reiterating a command. The ambiguity or duality (or both) in the voice of the speaker of this command, whether it is Daily talking to himself and/or to the reader or if it is the familiar voice of a professor encouraging him to “write what he knows,” adds to the complexity and persuasiveness of this repeated phrase. Put another way, ‘exigency’ could be the permeable membrane surrounding Marjorie Levinson’s theorized ‘lyrical empty space’ through which the reader, the poet, and other possible characters in the poem can pass through freely, occupy, and interpret.

The ambiguity in the voice of the “write what you know” phrase’s commander also has importance. This ambiguity obscures the temporality of this poem and, depending on the voice, may increase the level of its exigency. To clarify, let us look at a few potential speakers and how they alter one’s reading of this poem. (As supporting evidence for the first six lines as spoken language by someone independent of Daily, the commas can act as quotation marks. Commas are, in fact, lower positioned half quotation marks.) Suggested previously, this voice could be of a professor speaking to Daily. It is possible that Daily has heard “write what you know” said to

him so many times in the past that it is repeatedly replaying itself in his mind. Or is it more plausible that Daily is speaking to himself? Could this poem be a representation of Daily's inner dialogue? This conversation, too, would be one that always exists, and he must encourage himself to write what he knows if he's ever going to make others understand. In that case, can this phrase be used as an encouraging writing prompt for the future? And what if this poem is actually a script and we, the reader, are the commanding voice while Daily responds to our words? Does this seem implausible? Daily does force us to read this phrase three times; does this result in a projection of our voice onto this poem and into its words?

If this were the case, which I believe to be the most intriguing, this poem would always exist in a present time frame; for each time the poem was read – each time a new reader encountered the poem – the result would be a new conversation between the reader and Daily. That is, were the poem to be read as a conversation between two people, two entities, we might assume the first lines, “write what you know,” are being said by character A, someone other than Daily, while the un-indented lines would be Daily himself. Character A seems to state boldly, “write what you know,” to the extent of commanding Daily. Daily responds skeptically, pessimistically, “know that what you write/won't do you any good.” In this way, Daily is rejecting the advice of his literal and figurative commander. Character A persists, “write what you know/write what you know/write what you know,” but Daily refutes coldly “wish I didn't know/the things I know/but/I'll write it anyway/so others/will understand....” This is Daily's imploration to be heard, and he accomplishes his goal by writing the poem. This poem's exigency achieves its utmost significance if each time it is read Daily's reader converses with him and comes to understand his experiences – his illness.

Before we give ourselves wholeheartedly to this one possibility for why Daily constructs this poem, let us look at the latter half of Daily's poem to see if he reveals other clues of exigency. The sixth stanza expresses a fraction of the medical obstacles Daily has had to endure and overcome. In providing us with this sampling, though, Daily establishes an environment with which we can sympathize and empathize. It is important that these four lines are the only four that rhyme, and we must infer this to be deliberate. By utilizing rhyming words immediately before the stanza of commas, Daily reminds us of the magnitude of sound in this poem. Once again, Daily shows us his ability to bring a quotidian poetic device, rhyme in its pleasantly familiar 'abab' guise, to a heightened level of purpose: it is a catalyst for sound that goes on to modify and increase the intensity of the stanza of commas that proceed it.

The rhyming stanza is not the only reason the three commas masquerade such power. These commas have blatant symbolic meaning. The most obvious, thanks to Daily's use of repetition, is that we know that these commas each mean "write what you know." They stridently and almost hyperbolically scream COMMA, COMMA, COMMA! It is beautifully paradoxical that these three stentorian commas exist in such a void and quiet white space, increasing their aural and visual impact on the reader. The commas also visually and aurally represent the drips of the previously mentioned IV within the rhyming stanza. Furthermore, the commas are a mimetic manifestation of the line "a second relapse," meaning a medical relapse or literally meaning repetition is, by definition, a relapsed literary device. By combining all of these characteristics, Daily has produced a stanza devoid of words but that will remain with the reader indefinitely. Most importantly, however, is that we are able to empathize unconditionally with Daily as we finish the poem and hear his wish – a wish that, too, becomes ours, "...help me forget what happened/along the way."

The final stanza is by far the most puzzling in this poem. In fact, I struggled while reading it, wondering what it meant since it seemed extraneous and detrimental to the effectiveness of the poem. However, upon reading and re-reading, it appears to compare two modes of healing: the therapeutic power of writing versus that of modern medicine. Poetry as therapy dominates the poem; however, both become apparent in the poem's final stanza, "Versed/ take me from A to B / and help me forget what happened / along the way." This emphasizes poetry's importance and purpose for Daily. The word "versed" literally means "to familiarize by study or experience or knowledgeable," whose root is "verse" which is defined as "a poem, a part of a poem, or the artwork of a poet" (OED). The meanings for the letters 'A' and 'B' are a bit vague but could represent two different states of mind, two lives, in which 'A' contains cancer and 'B' does not. In fact, the title of one of Daily's books (not the one which this poem comes from) is titled "the b sides of death and dying" with an image of a record player and record on the cover, which supports this possibility that the letters represent literally and figuratively different sides. This book is divided into two parts, "side A" and "side B," with the epigraphs "the only real cure is death because with life you just never know" and "the halfway point is a point of no return and we're already on our way" respectively. Based solely on the words in each epigraph, "A" is clearly more pessimistic with its allusions to suicide and "B" more optimistic with its encouragement to persevere through life. If we apply these connotations to the line "take me from A to B," the analysis is not so difficult.

We must notice that "Versed" is the only capitalized word in the poem. This may just be Daily's way of emphasizing the word; however, it may also represent a proper noun. In fact, this is exactly what Daily has done: "Versed" is a homonym. Versed, pronounced "ver-said," is a medication, a variation of the more common Midazolam. This drug is delivered through an IV

and serves four possible purposes: It is 1. an anxiolytic, a drug used in the treatment of anxiety, 2. an amnesia, a drug used in helping one forget traumatic events, 3. a hypnotic, a drug which induces sleep, or 4. a sedative, a drug that depresses the central nervous system and reduces physical pain during surgical procedures³. For Daily, writing verse (poetry) and medication (in this case Versed) has the same effect on him; both take him “from A to B.” Additionally, based on its four purposes, Daily’s wish “to forget what happened/ along the way” also makes more sense.

Daily’s use of repetition is prevalent throughout his work and is not limited to this poem. In his poem *i saw the dead praying* he uses repetition in a slightly different way.

i saw the dead praying
mantis
dead laying
dead praying
mantis
on the sidewalk
cement
wrapping round the walkway
the hospital
an hour past dawn

first that morning
last this night
to arrive
to come into
the grand hall of treatment
where only curtains
divide the confessional chairs

i saw the dead praying
mantis
i saw the dead praying
through toxins
glass bottles
one another and not to God

³ “Versed.” 8 Dec. 2004. 16 Dec. 2005 <<http://www.rxlist.com/cgi/generic2/versedsyr.htm>>

one by one to leave me
to mock me
to walk alone
 of harrowing fare
down hallowed halls

 nobody knows where i go
 nobody knows where i go
nobody knows where i go
with dismal face
 stuttering pace
 dead waiting
dead and laying
 dead and staying
 tired of saying

i saw the dead praying⁴

In this poem, like in “write what you know,” Daily concentrates on the repetition of a solitary phrase: “i saw the dead praying.” However, the sound that Daily creates so brilliantly in “write what you know” is not the result of the repetition in this poem. Whereas “write what you know” is but a command, this repeated phrase is an image, and repeating imagery serves a disparate purpose. Here it stresses Daily’s obsession with the image of this dead praying mantis. It is a well-known fact that the praying mantis is one of many insects in which sexual cannibalism, the consumption of the male after mating, is common. Clearly, solely based on the information in this poem, the insect’s sex is indeterminate; however, the latent symbolism of the praying mantis is intriguing. Is not cancer, which Daily has, but the human body’s own cells turning on itself? Cancer is defined as a malignant growth or tumour in different parts of the body, that tends to spread indefinitely and to reproduce itself, as also to return after removal; it eats away or corrodes the part in which it is situated, and generally ends in death (OED). Put more simply, cancer occurs when healthy human cells proliferate uncontrollably and without physiological

⁴ Joseph Daily. *The B-Sides of Death and Dying*. 1st ed. Flushing: Self Published, 2003. Hereafter cited in this work as *DD*.

purpose, spread, and seize body function required for life. The cannibalistic praying mantis serves as a metaphor for the cannibalistic effect of malignant cells on a healthy body.

Similar to “write what you know,” Daily’s desire for us to know and understand his disease and the traumatic physical and emotional moments that accompany it emanates from this poem. Furthermore, in this poem, Daily’s repetition and rhyme – which is simply the repetition of similar sounds – is mimetic of this rapid proliferation of malignant cells. The word ‘dead’ appears nine times, ‘praying’ five times, the number of words that rhyme with “praying” (including slant rhyme) is five as well, and ‘mantis’ makes three appearances. Daily ends the poem with “i saw the dead praying,” which includes two of these most frequent words, and, based on the previous three times this phrase exists within the poem, we would expect the words following ‘dead praying’ to be ‘mantis,’ but no such word exists in the final line. It is the disappearance of this already dead praying mantis, which describes literally and figuratively a second death, which exposes the central motive for this poem: To use the praying mantis as a tool to create a hospital experience for the reader.

Daily’s obsession with seeing the dead praying mantis and repeatedly revisiting its image is a result of the numerous lonely walks and visits he takes to the hospital.⁵ He tells us that he is the “first that morning” and “last this night / to arrive to...the grand hall of treatment.” The meticulous use of the words ‘that’ and ‘this,’ in addition to their ambiguity, creates a lack of specificity in time. Daily’s “write what you know” exists in an everlasting present (so determined based on Levinson’s lyric-poetry theory and the possibility that the poem is reborn each time a new person reads it), but without a defined time frame – mentioning the past, present, and future – Daily makes this poem representative of all times in which he “has been [to

⁵ In fact, when I met with Daily to receive this poem, he told me that he had just come from treatment at the University of Michigan hospital. Much like in this poem, alone he drove himself to and from the hospital.

the hospital], and may be again.” Daily’s ambiguity in time is persistent in the varying tenses in his poem: The first stanza is written using the past tense; the second begins in the past and quickly moves to the present; The third and fourth are written in the past; The phrase “nobody knows where I go,” which starts the fifth stanza, utilizes the present; The phrase “tired of saying,” the final line of the fifth stanza, could imply the present and/or the future if it is read as “I am (currently) tired of saying, ‘I saw the dead praying’ (simply because it has been repeated throughout the poem and probably said many times before this poem’s construction), and I don’t want to say it again (in the future).” The final stanza, which is solely the one-lined phrase, “i saw the dead praying” is in the past (though, if we read it as the death of the mantis, it would be the first time we don’t see the mantis associated with this phrase and, therefore, we would be witnessing its death as it happens, meaning we would be placed in the present). This ambiguity in time perpetuates the idea that Daily himself cannot distinguish one hospital visit from the other.

The repetition in the phrase “nobody knows where I go” serves a similar purpose to that of “write what you know” in that it triggers exigency. Notice that Daily states “nobody knows where I go,” not once or twice, but three times, and each iteration of the phrase revises the one before it, meaning no one is like the other. In other words, the first “nobody knows where I go” is a template for the second (*DD*). The second time we hear it, though the words are identical, it has a different meaning. A sense of urgency or desperation can be heard and felt. Like with “write what you know,” we can imagine the lines being read more loudly as the phrase is repeated so that by the time we read the third one, we are twice removed from the template and the desperate tone has grown twice exponentially. Furthermore, the entire poem dedicates itself to describing exactly where Daily goes (he illustrates the hospital as the “grand hall of treatment”

with “curtains” that “divide the confessional chairs,” hallowed halls, toxins in glass bottles, and a cement walkway that leads up to and wraps around it. The serpentine form of the poem even resembles this walkway that wraps around this hospital) (*DD*). It would be quite paradoxical if we were to suggest that “nobody knows where I go” means “nobody knows I go to the hospital when I walk alone” or “nobody knows what the hospital is like” since he provides us with many details.

Note Daily’s spelling of the word ‘praying’; the insect “the praying mantis” can be spelled two ways, praying/preying mantis. Daily uses the former throughout his poem to describe both the mantis and the dead. Daily’s choice is an interesting one for it helps characterize them: Both the mantis and the dead have been preyed upon, the mantis possibly by his mate and the dead by their respective diseases. However, by using “praying” instead, Daily makes the characters victims, more passive than if they were “preying,” and easier with which to sympathize. (Put another way, describing the mantis as “preying” would alter our perception of it, and it would not make much sense if the dead were preying.) People that pray often kneel, especially while confessing sins in confessional chairs, and this makes them resemble the shape of a mantis. So, he unifies the dead and the mantis by describing them both as “praying.” In fact, Daily’s memory of the mantis from his walk to the hospital could be what later triggers his altered state of mind.

It is as if this imaginary hospital represents a limbo, an intermediate state or place of confinement. Based on the following lines, it appears that Daily visualizes himself as part of this place:

nobody knows where i go
with dismal face
stuttering pace
dead waiting

dead and laying
dead and staying
tired of saying

i saw the dead praying (*DD* lines 31-38)

With the ambiguity in these lines, we cannot be sure if Daily is describing himself or the praying dead. In the first three lines, he says, "...nobody knows where i go with dismal face [and] stuttering pace....," and it seems apparent that he is describing himself. However, because lines 34-36 all begin with "dead," we cannot be so sure who Daily is describing. We would expect them to describe the praying dead; yet, in line 37, Daily switches back to describing himself with the frustration of saying, "i saw the dead praying." Daily's organization confuses us as he alternates between describing himself and the dead. In doing so, Daily's world and the world of the dead become blurred. By the end of the poem, we are unsure of exactly where Daily has taken us (physically or mentally), but we not only know, we understand, it is not pleasant.

Freud's Modified Dream Theory

Mattie Stepanek, Madeleine Alston, and Daniella

Thus far, we have discussed the work of five experienced poets: Kenyon, Hall, Yolen, Smith, and Daily. Each writer's experience and history with poetry varies. Kenyon earned a B.A. and a M.A in creative writing at the University of Michigan, published four books of poems, and was named the Poet Laureate of New Hampshire before she died. Hall, after attending Harvard and Oxford Universities, has published fifteen books of poems, has had much experience with prose, and has written many children's books. Before writing *The Radiation Sonnets*, Yolen published over 300 children's books, winning the Nebula Award and the Caldecott medal repeatedly. Smith's *Transplant* is his first book of poems; he summarized his prior experiences with poetry for me:

"I began to write poems about 20 years prior to getting sick. The first of these were actually dreams that I wrote down, and a lot of my early poems were what one might call therapeutic, poems about my feelings and experiencing...Other poems were about birds and birding. Love poems, political poems, poems about lit. By now I've maybe published 100 poems, most of them in journals, some in birding publications. So you could say I was a committed amateur poet prior to this. I was also of course a teacher of literary poetry." (SI)

Daily has never been published but began writing poetry about his disease during his senior year of high school, and eventually, "though unintentionally and powerfully," it permeated his writing in college. He used prose as well as poetry to write about disease. I was elated when he informed me that recently sent his two books of poetry to be registered with the Library of Congress.

One's experience with and knowledge of poetics plays an important role when writing poetry. The more a poet is exposed to poetry, either his own or another's, the more he absorbs and can use in future poetry. In other words, poetic knowledge gives a poet the tools he needs to be a poetic craftsman. A poetic craftsman writes with a purpose and has reasons for using the elements (words, punctuation, line breaks, literary devices, etc.) that subsist in a poem. A poetic craftsman is in complete control of what an eventual reader sees.

Hall and Yolen have their reasons for using controlled forms, and Smith and Daily have their reasons for using a multitude of forms. I have attempted to elucidate these reasons, and as a reader, that is all I can do. I have grouped these poets in this way – Hall/Yolen and Smith/Hall – for it feels natural. Smith and Daily have more than just a multitude of form setting themselves apart from the controlled forms of Hall and Yolen; in crafting original form from poem to poem, Smith and Daily give their poetry much more depth and room for interpretation. This is not to say that Hall and Yolen's poems do not allow interpretation, I simply claim that a reader has more to explore after reading a multifaceted poem versus reading a group of identically constructed poems.

I see this dichotomy as a direct result of the role illness plays in each poets' life; Hall and Yolen write from a caregiver's prospective and Smith and Daily write from a sufferer's prospective. While the amount of emotional trauma on each of these two groups of poets may not differ much (rather, it is impossible to tell simply from their poetry), the physical trauma is undeniably greater for the ill. And what these five poets have shown us is that one's experience with illness and, most importantly, health status impact the outward form of each poem, as if a poem's appearance parallels the poet's mind and body.

This idea of a poem having an outward and an inward appearance relates well to the different stages of illness, of which I believe there to be two: the latent stage, the period during which a disease lurks in one's system before showing itself, and the manifest stage, the period when a disease is able to be observed or reported and produces observable signs or physical changes (OED). Taken from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, this dream theory befits my concept of the disease lyric in that every poem ever written has manifest and latent content. The manifest content includes the language, the words, the literary devices, and most notably the form appearing on the paper and varies insofar as the presentation of the poem varies. The latent content is that which we, the reader, are able to deduce from the poem: It is the interpretation, the unwritten meaning(s). And while each poem has manifest and latent content, no two poems have equal amounts of each.

Allow me to further explicate the connection between poet and reader and between manifest and latent content. A poet controls the manifest content. He may have his reasons for presenting a poem a certain way, but at times even he does not see what it is that he has constructed. In other words, a poet dictates most of what a reader sees. That which the poet has the least control over is the latent content. The reader identifies the latency of a poem through interpretation, so ultimately, the reader is in control of the latent content. However, it is the poet's manifest content that gives the reader the tools with which to identify and more profoundly interpret the latent content. To clarify, Yolen's poetry, for example, has less manifest content than Hall's simply because she varies her form and language less than he does. If we continue on this 'content continuum,' the amount of manifest content in Smith's poetry is closer to that of Daily's poetry. As I see it, Daily surpasses Smith in the amount of manifest content because while Smith does utilize unique form, he does not match Daily's purposeful poetic

craftsmanship. To be more specific, all of Smith's poetry is aligned on the left side of the page while the words in Daily's poems are at times completely scattered across the page. Additional selections from each poet's work may help expound this observation:

Q&A

Q. And what things helped you through your recovery?

A. It's hard to be sure
But I would say my wife, music, the beauty
Of everything, seeing it all just out there
Every day, my dog, yoga, Ativan,
Chess, determination, patience,
Pretending to get an erection,
The amazing appearance of women,
Children, other people doing different things,
Johnny Hartman, Coltrane, and chess
In no particular order.

Q. Any insights after the ordeal?

A. Yes, I remember
Finding out one year out
From one of the nurses that Ativan
Is also an amnesiac. (TP)

it's like i'
ve got al
l
thi s tuff
floating
a round in my he
ad
that need
s to get out
thro
ugh
tears o *
r an
explosion *
and i do
n't k *
now
which would mak

e me
feel
better
(GC)

Smith's craftsmanship is much more subtle than Daily's. Take Smith's repetition of "chess" in the response of the first question as an example. We could take this repetition as an unnoticed mistake in editing, but when the amnesia-inducing quality of the Ativan is disclosed, we notice Smith's subtle cleverness and wittiness. However, the scattered form Daily has created embodies the emotional turmoil that was the impetus to write this poem. Splitting words (especially those not meant to be split) into parts – syllables and phonemes – increases the manifest content and adds latency to his poem. For instance, splitting "stuff" into "s" and "tuff" alludes to the word 'tough,' separating "or" into "o" and "r" and placing the "r" next to "an" appropriately creates a new and active word, and isolating the letters "n, o, w" from the word "know" adds an interesting temporal urgency to the poem. There are those that write the disease lyric who possess and utilize poetic knowledge, there are also those that find solace in writing the disease lyric without having any previous poetic experience. Both types of poet, however, are capable of crafting a poem with an appreciable level of complexity.

Take Matthew Stepanek – better known as Mattie – as an example. Given these brief close looks, it appears the more 'unconventional' a poem is, the more thought that goes into a poem's form, the more manifest content a poem has, and the more freedom a reader has for interpretation, increasing the latent content. Thus, I have concluded that the amount of latent content in a poem is directly proportional to the amount of manifest content; the more the manifest content, the more the latent content. Allow me to justify, however, that one's quantity of manifest and latent content do not affect the integrity of the poetry. Just as By the age of thirteen, the age at which he died, Mattie published five books of poetry, three of which made the

New York Time's Best Sellers list. Mattie suffered from a rare form of muscular dystrophy from which his three older siblings died. His mother suffers from the adult form and was diagnosed after giving birth to her four children. Mattie explains:

“I didn’t get to meet [Katie]...And I didn’t know [Stevie] either. I knew [Jamie], and we had such a brotherly bond...And he died when I was two or three. And it was very hard for me...And I sort of didn’t understand death. I wasn’t expecting it. And I knew to say, my brother Jamie died. But I didn’t know what it meant. And that’s mainly how my poetry started...I didn’t know it was poetry at first. I was just talking and playing...And then I learned [it was] poetry, my mom told me. And I asked her to write it down for me. And I said, wow, this is a way I can express my feelings, in a way that I can cope with this hard life and others can understand it.”¹

This precocious boy could recognize the therapeutic power of writing even at the age of four. Writing was useful for learning about his terminal illness and eventual death. Remembering Macklin Smith’s poem “Call and Response” for a moment, read the following quote from Mattie:

“Sometimes I say, why me? Why have I had such a hard life? Why have my siblings died? Why does it not go away? And then I think again, why not me? Better me than a kid who already has stress on his life, or better me than a baby who wouldn’t understand it and

¹ Stepanek, Matthew. Interview with Larry King. *CNN*. 19 May 2002. 30 Jan. 2006
<<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/020519/lk|w.00.html>> Hereafter cited in the text as *LK*.

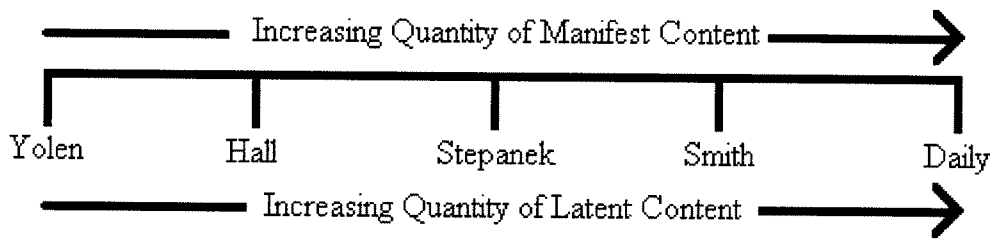
who has a better chance of hurting more. So I think why me, and
then I think why not me?" (LK)

Except for his lower level of education, and thus a less refined poetic knowledge and crafting ability, Mattie is no different than any of the aforementioned adult poets. We know Mattie's understanding of poetry was non-existent when he first began to write, and that much of the credit for the presentation of his early poems was originally in the hands of his mother. Mattie also demonstrates his naïveté as a writer by saying, "I don't usually [edit a] poem. I usually check for grammar and spelling." This proves that even after he began writing for himself, Mattie did little to control the manifest content in his poetry.

Despite being naive writers, the inexperienced – those people that find solace in writing about illness but have no previous practice with literature – still fall into my "Manifest-Latency Proportionality" theory. Each time Mattie wrote a poem, he created manifest content, though he did not give it much thought or change it after the first draft. His lack of previous poetic knowledge, lack of revision, and lack of creative craftsmanship, however, still led to a variety of form. In fact, I believe Mattie represents best Freud's original theory of manifest and latent content. If dreams are uncontrollable, so is the manifest content; this parallels well Mattie's having had little control over the manifest content of his poetry. Thus, Freud would agree that Mattie's poems still have substantial latent content. Looking back to the content continuum (see Figure 1 below), Mattie and other inexperienced writers would fall directly in the middle. Yolen and Hall have control over their poem's form, but their choice for decreased variety leads to lower manifest and lower latent content. Mattie's poems, despite his decreased control of the manifest content, have a variety of form and latency. And as discussed before, the originality of Smith and Daily's poetry leads to higher manifest and latent content.

Content Continuum

Figure 1²



Examining Mattie's poetry will give us a better understanding of his place in the disease lyric genre. Keep in mind that Mattie is the first poet we have discussed that has not been affected by cancer. This reinforces the disease lyric's accessibility as a therapeutic device for anyone, regardless of the inflicting disease or the poet's relation to the illness.

The Left-Over Child

A long time ago, my parents
 Had a little girl named Katie.
 They thought that they would only
 Have this one little child.
 But then mommy started growing
 Another little baby inside of her.
 It was a little boy named Stevie.
 But little Katie died, and
 Then little Stevie died, and
 My parents were all alone
 Without any children at all.
 Then, they grew another baby.
 It was a little boy named Jamie.
 And then in 1990, they had
 Another little boy named Mattie,
 And Jamie and Mattie were
 Brothers together for a long time.
 But then, Jamie died, too,
 But Mattie was still alive because
 He didn't die like his brothers and sister.
 Now, he's not really a little brother anymore,
 But he's not really the only child either.
 Mattie is the left-over child,
 All alone with the parents of dead children.³

² Kenyon does not appear on this continuum for we can not make conclusions having only one poem.

Despite Mattie's age and lack of poetic training, his writing is emotional and effective. He begins the poem talking in the first person; he refers to his parents as "my parents" twice and calls his mother "mommy." However, when he mentions himself, he does so in third person. "And then in 1990, they had / Another little boy named Mattie..." (*JTH*). Was this switch in perspective intentional? Does and should intentionality play into how we interpret Mattie's poetry? How much credit do we give Mattie? Do we interpret this poem in the way we would one of the adult poets we have already seen? We know he does not edit his work, but this should not discredit it. We also know that Mattie writes with candor; what is on the paper and in his books represent his true feelings. In my opinion, then, it would be offensive if we did not take this poem seriously.

In fact, I would hope that Mattie's perspectival switch was not intentional, and this is exactly how I read this poem. This inadvertent information provides us with a more accurate view of Mattie's perception of his identity. This poem also tells us that Mattie was actively trying to understand his illness and acknowledging that death was imminent. If we believe in this poem we will see that its latent content is pungent and authentic.

Admittedly, not all of Mattie's poetry is extraordinary. He *was* a child. Some of his poems were written at the age of three. However, his strong religious faith led to optimism and maturity far beyond his years. His incessant philosophizing, his constant struggle with understanding death, his ability to convey the difficult truth, his willingness to share his work publicly, and the moments of profundity in his work make me believe in him as a poet. Because of these qualities, Mattie's poem "About Angels" is one of my personal favorites:

About Angels

³ Mattie J.T. Stepanek. *Journey Through Heartsongs*. Alexandria: VSP Books, 2001. Hereafter cited in the text as *JTH*.

Do you know what Angels wear?
 They wear
 Angel-halos and Angel-wings, and
 Angel-dresses and Angel-shirts under them, and
 Angel-underwear and Angel-shoes and Angel-socks, and
 On their heads
 They wear
 Angel-hair —
 Except if they don't have any hair.
 Some children and grown-ups
 Don't have any hair because they
 Have to take medicine that makes it fall out.
 And sometimes,
 The medicine doesn't make them all better,
 And they die.
 And they don't have any Angel-hair.
 So do you know what God does then?
 He gives them an
 Angel-wig.
 And that's what Angels wear. (*JTH* 12)

Finding humor in his physically debilitating and terminally ill situation takes us through a gamut of emotion. A child writing about death is possibly one of the most disheartening things one can read, but this author's inspirational tone fills us with encouragement.

While Mattie is the only child I have come across who has published prolifically, finding children that use poetry (and other forms of literature) to express anxiety with illness was not as difficult as I originally thought it would be. Thanks to Joan Fleitas – a registered nurse with a doctorate in Health Education and an interest in the social dimensions of chronic illness and disability in children – and her website designed to “Improve the quality of life for children with medical problems by sensitizing others to their stories,” I have been able to access the poetry of a couple remarkable child poets⁴. I will introduce you to two poets who, although inexperienced,

⁴ “Guidance Channel Ezine.” Guidance Channel Online. Feb. 2006. 7 Mar. 2006
 <<http://www.guidancechannel.com/default.aspx?M=w&index=27>>

best represent understanding their illness and writing with candor: Madeleine Alston and Daniella (whose surname is not disclosed).

At the age of thirteen, Madeleine was diagnosed with Ewing's disease, a rare cancer of the bone occurring mainly in childhood and adolescence. Small tumors were detected in her lungs, though the largest tumor, the size of a grapefruit, was in her thigh and resulted in the complete removal of her femur. A titanium prosthesis replaced the bone but would have to be replaced as she grew. She endured chemotherapy and a relapse. The following poem resulted:

Why

You are familiar
yet different
I know you so well
but I thought you were gone
forever
My old enemy
my silent deadly adversary
Why are you back?
I beat you
We had an understanding
You retreated
I triumphed
you were gone for good
Why have you come back here?
stronger
bigger
relentless
changed
Don't you realize you can't win?
we will fight
and both take a beating
and either
you will retreat again
or I will die
and you will die with me
Either way
you lose
So why did you come back? (Alston)

Madeleine writes a conversational poem, probing her relapsed illness with questions in order to make sense of it. In fact, Madeleine animates her illness, giving it legs with which to “retreat” and “come back,” providing it arms with which to “fight” and “take a beating,” and bestowing it with mortality so it can “die.” Though she personifies her illness by speaking to it, she does not supply it with a voice of its own. Unlike some of the poets we have seen thus far – specifically Kenyon and Smith – Madeleine does not allow her illness to ever silence her. She takes it upon herself to silence it by writing a one-sided conversation.

I am impressed with how the language of the lines set between Madeleine’s interrogative questions in lines 8, 14, and 28 – notice that these three questions are but a variation of “Why are you back?” – empower these questions and give each, despite their similarity, new meaning. In Lines 1 through 7, Madeleine establishes for us the previous relationship with her illness. Elapsed time allows the “relentless” disease to change and grow “bigger” and “stronger”; Madeleine says it is “familiar / yet different.” Knowing the disease “so well,” her “silent deadly adversary” evokes an unpleasant past. With a tinge of trepidation, Madeleine asks, “Why are you back?”

Madeleine quickly deserts this fear with positive affirmations: “I beat you,” “I triumphed,” “you retreated,” and “you were gone for good.” These phrases of empowerment signify Madeleine’s transition into acceptance of her relapsed disease. Line 10 serves a different purpose, though: It represents the previous establishment and present violation of a bodily contract between Madeleine and her illness, a contract in which Madeleine trusted. It is because of this breached agreement that we perceive deceit, and not dread, in the second inquiry, “Why have you come back here?”

In the latter half of the poem, Madeleine embraces the relapse, using feelings of deceit as fuel to overcome it. Remembering the ramifications of chemotherapy, Madeleine prepares herself for another chemical “beating” and faces it with confidence and maturity. She cleverly threatens the cancer when she says, “either / you will retreat again / or I will die / and you will die with me / Either way / you lose.” She shows no emotional weakness and, like Mattie, does not fear death. Madeleine, having completely extricated herself from fear, asks one last time, “So why do you come back?” with a vengeance.

Daniella also utilizes this one-sided conversational poetic form. And while no information is provided about Daniella or the disease she suffers from, she writes a poem introducing two challenges universal amongst the ill: overcoming the barrier that exists between patient and clinician and struggling with identity.

Paperwork

A white lined paper,
holes and date on the top,
vital signs and temperature, blood pressure
Is my name there?
Do you know who I am?
Am I more to you than a diagnosis,
a number, a list of medications?
Can you look at me, think of me, as
A person? A human being?
More than a file three inches thick?
Who am I to you?
What am I to you?
Do you remember me tonight,
After you have hung your white coat
and signed out on your time sheet?
Do you ever think of me when you are home,
when my parents are pacing the hall,
when my breathing is labored and
my temperature is rising?
Your pager sounds at 3 a.m.
Does it ever occur to you that
It might be me?

But then again,
Who am I to you?⁵

In an interesting article entitled, “A Conversation: Humanizing the Encounter Between Physician and Patient Through Journalized Poetry,” an oncologist (John) provides “commentary thoughts” on a cancer patient’s (Jon) journal in order to draw clinician and client closer to each other’s understanding and experience, through the subjective voice of each (103)⁶. I include this essay because it parallels the theme of ‘identity crises’ with which Daniella takes issue in her poem. Including a doctor’s point-of-view also gives voice to and a possible explanation for the silent doctor in Daniella’s poem.

Jon’s Journal

“I’m facing a fight with my life...Yet, what I keep harping on about is my hair... My body has been a disappointment to me... Today I feel ashamed of myself...It’s a weird humbling experience to be so obviously aware I couldn’t sustain life on my own. Someone else’s blood was needed for me to live...I listened to those brave women talking about adjusting and changing their life, and adjusting and pulling at their wigs... The bed won and took me under the blankets of despair to hide and shiver...Skip went to work crying again. This adds to my humiliation and shame. He doesn’t deserve this. I am a parasite sapping his soul so I can exist another day. He doesn’t ask much in

⁵ Daniella. “Paperwork.” *Bandaides and Blackboards*. 14 Nov. 2004. 7 Mar. 2006.
<<http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/faculty/jfleitas/bandaides/paperpo.html>>

⁶ John Graham-Pole, and Jon Jones Montgomery. “A Conversation: Humanizing the Encounter Between Physician and Patient Through Journalized Poetry.” *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 11.2 (1997): 103-111. Hereafter cited in the text as *JPT*.

return, just that I clean the coffee pot – and even that overwhelms me.”

(JPT)

John's comments

“And we caregivers... Providers of information... of the diagnosis...and the prognosis... care plan – How much of all this “subjective runs through our minds as we unfold our medical story?...How much of it can we ever acknowledge... appreciate... feel?...we must always know that the best we can do is listen – attentive and humble... this is the only way we can draw closer... cross the barrier... seek the balance between empathizing with our patients and owning their problems as our own (that wellworn way to loss of equanimity, to burnout)... But this – immobilizing despair... this is outside our experience... maybe beyond our understanding... certainly not within the gambit of our training... To whom does she look for care now? To her hematologist?... Her local doc?... Her social worker?... Her most trusted BMTU nurse?... Meanwhile...the coffee pot defeats her.” (JPT)

Daniella, Madeleine, and Mattie have confirmed for me the ubiquitous, age-indiscriminate, collective struggle that is trying to understand the physical and emotional implications of illness. Children, like adults, want to understand their illness situation and, in fact, do understand more than most adults realize. Maya Bluebond-Langner, in her study of awareness and communication in terminally ill children, states, “All of the leukemic children whom I studied faced death with a

great deal of understanding about the world of the seriously ill and their place in it. They knew the institution and the disease as well as any lay adult” (135). Because of the unfamiliar terrain of illness, it is to no surprise that even children write to resolve their anxieties and that they utilize poetic form in similar ways as adults.

Daniella, for example, uses constraining poetic form in the way Jane Yolen does. Instead of using the sonnet, however, she rewrites the lyrics to a song, “My Favorite Things” from the film *The Sound of Music*.⁷ The lyrics to the first verse of this song are:

“Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens
Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens
Brown paper packages tied up with strings
These are a few of my favorite things.”

Each line is a series of three dactyls, metrical feet consisting of an accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables, and one trochee, a metrical foot consisting of an accented syllable followed by one unaccented syllable. (Notice the last two lines have three dactyls with an incomplete trochee). This meter can be better demonstrated by overemphasizing the rhythm and pronouncing the stanza like this:

“RAINdrops on ROSEs and WHISkers on KITtens
BRIGHT copper KETtles and WARM woolen MITtens
BROWN paper PACKages TIED up with STRINGS
THESE are a FEW of my FAVORite THINGS”

⁷ “The Sound of Music Soundtrack Lyrics.” 10 Mar. 2006.
<<http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/thesoundofmusic/myfavoritethings.htm>>.

The melody also follows an AABB rhyme scheme. It is these two characteristics, the metric rhythm and rhyme pattern, which Daniella must follow. Here is a selection from her poem, "The Sound of Music":

Doctor's who don't seem to care when you cry,
But rather keep poking while no one asks "why?"
A shot here, a pill there, and let's take some blood too.
Laying in the MRI with nothing to do.

Relapse, remission, exacerbation or flare,
Plan for next week? I don't even dare.
Friends are hard to keep with this illness of mine,
Always up and down, never a straight line.

I enjoy getting cards and notes when I'm sick,
People who stare at me, I'd like to kick.
But what I most of all would like today –
A fairy godmother to make my disease go away.⁸

Despite the few imperfections in the rhythm, Daniella uses this song's limited form successfully. The task of fitting words that describe her feelings and experiences to a pre-existing meter is similar to the process of following the strict form that constitutes a sonnet; this process gives Daniella a sense of control over her evidently traumatic social and personal experience.

As these child poets implicitly vary the manifest content of their poetry, and as the adult poets purposefully vary their manifest content, we see that lyric poetry varies insofar as the amount of manifest / latent content enacted by the author. Despite this difference, one commonality between all disease lyric poets is use of form (manifest content) to convey one's emotional state and the directly proportional relationship between this form and the underlying meaning of the poem (latent content).

⁸ Daniella. "Favorite Things: Adapted from "Favorite Things"... 'The Sound of Music'." Bandaides and Blackboards. 14 Nov. 2004. 7 Mar. 2006. <<http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/faculty/jfleitas/bandaides/things.html>>

Conclusion

Rick Fields

This thesis has examined the work of eight people who chose poetry when writing about their experiences with illness. By comparing and contrasting work typifying each poet, I have been able to establish three salient modalities of the disease lyric genre: the prevalence of lyric versus narrative, the variability in poetic form, and manifest and latent content. It may be useful to summarize these features by referring to a poet independent of the eight already discussed: Rick Fields. Not only is Fields independent in the sense that I have not, prior to this moment, mentioned him, but that he wrote his book of disease poetry, *Fuck You, Cancer & Other Poems*, five years before any of the poets I have discussed. This means Fields would not have read any of the disease lyrics previously explored in this thesis. This is important because though he had no exposure to these poets, his poetry embodies many of the techniques the other poets utilize¹.

Rick Fields, who suffered with brain cancer, wrote:

Ode

A little cell
loses its way
goes astray

¹¹ Admittedly, this does not rule out the possibility that the poets whom I have analyzed may have read Rick Field's work and borrowed his poetic techniques. While this could be the case for Macklin Smith, owner of the book I used, many of the child poets were far too young to have read *Fuck You, Cancer*. Furthermore, disease was not yet part of Yolen's life at the time of Fields' publication, and she, therefore, probably had no reason to read such material.

Joseph Daily informed me:

"I began to read *My Own Medicine* but felt too close to the subject matter; like I had been there too often and too much to read what I am sure is a great book. It's kind of like how I could never work in the medical field."

Given the fact that Daily "felt too close to the subject matter" and had to stop reading a book about an oncologist's struggle with cancer, I find it safe to conclude that he, too, did not read or was even aware of Fields' work. Hall, on the other hand, having written previously about his own illness, may have accessed Field's poetry, but given the fact that Hall began writing poems immediately after Kenyon's death – which preceded the Fields' publication by two years – it is unlikely the he was influenced by Fields' work.

Above all, however, Rick Fields' book, *Fuck You, Cancer*, used a small press, Crooked Cloud Project, to publish his book and was only by mail. Having sold less than 1,000 copies to date, it is unlikely that any of these poets (with exception to Smith) reserved a copy. (Chadwick, David. "Crooked Cucumber." 31 July 1999. 16 Mar. 2006 http://www.cuke.com/sangha_news/fields.html)

The gates of hell
 creak open 5
stench of sulfurous decay

The title is the first part of Fields' poem that we read, and, because of its specificity, "Ode" is one that we must further consider before we read the body. In choosing this title, Fields is providing us a clue as to what it is that we will read. Since an ode is a lyric poem of praise addressed to a particular subject, we would expect to read a poem in which the speaker communicates directly with a subject, possibly using an I-Thou discourse. However, once we

start reading the body of the poem, we notice and are perplexed by the fact that we are being told a *story* about “a little cell” with a third person narrator – the perspective used in narrative poems. Not only is there lacking a first person perspective – the voice of Fields – but the poem seems entirely void of emotion. We may pause and ask, “Is this an ode? How is this lyric poetry.” We do not hear the narrator directly address the cell until he asks, “Where are you going?” in line fourteen, and it is at this point that Fields’ voice is finally revealed. Clearly Fields is not as delicate as Donald Hall while balancing the lyric mode with the narrative mode, but what is important is that he does utilize a combination of the two. Again, this provides the reader with a more complete description of the disease and a representation of Fields’ feelings.

Furthermore, before the initiation of the conversation between Fields and the cell, personification of the little cell occurs. To illustrate this, Fields describes the cell as “living matter” in line 8, forgetful in line 10, and self-motivated in lines 11 and 12. We notice, too, that, like with Madeleine Alston’s poem, the little cell, and thus the disease, is not given its own voice and thus is silenced. We also understand that the cell can proliferate and even change its identity in order to cause pain; this transformation in identity or personality is explained when Fields pleads with the cell not to be a “thorn / in the soul” or a “knife / in the heart of [his] life” (FYC).³ Since the cell is alive, it can die, and Fields, as many of the poets (especially the child poets), accepts death with confidence and threatens this cell with their shared mortality.

The outward form, and thus the manifest content, of “Ode” is closely related to the poetry of Joseph Daily. We saw Daily use the form of his poem “i saw the dead praying” in a “concrete” way meaning he made the poem resemble the object which he was describing. Fields poem resembles “little cells,” and he accomplishes this by using short lines in a series of tercets

³ Out of dialogue, emotional reactions are born. This means, too, that in this poem, it is not until Fields begins to speak to the cell that his poem is lyrical.

in which the second line is always arbitrarily, deeply, and differently indented. In conjunction with short lines, Fields also uses rhyme – the repetition of sound – in the way Daily does. Here, rhyme is a mimetic representation of the metastasization, the rapid proliferation, of cancer cells.

As expected, the outward form of “Ode” adds greatly to its latency. The frantic pace of this poem and the rapid eye movement necessary to read it expose the anxiety Fields felt in writing on this topic and while fighting his cancer. Additionally, the deeply indented short lines parallel perfectly the “odd man out” as the creator of tension that Macklin Smith uses in his poetry (*SI*). Using direct correspondence with the cell in line 14 as the abrupt switch from the lyric mode to the narrative mode is rhetorically effective in that phrases like, “Please stop growing,” “Don’t be a thorn / knife,” and “Go away” give birth to a desperate tone and the revelation of Fields latent emotional reactions. Throughout this thesis, the latency of disease lyric poetry – the emotional responses that interpretations of manifest content disclose – has repeatedly surprised me in what it can reveal about one’s relationship with illness.

And I have only scratched the surface of this genre. There exist benefits to using poetry as therapy that I have not even begun to discuss. It is apparent, for example, that identity is a central theme in the poetry that I have included, and we can gain insight on the topics of stigmatization and marginalization of the ill when reading it. It is only within the last twenty-five years that poetic therapy has been recognized as legitimately advantageous to one’s mental well being.⁴ Bibliotherapy was established shortly before this, and it literally means “books, or literature, to serve or help medically” (NAPT). Advocates of poetry therapy say that it is a specific and powerful form of bibliotherapy, unique in its use of metaphor, imagery, rhythm, and other poetic devices (NAPT). The recent emergence of this field, however, has many people

⁴ “History.” The National Association for Poetry Therapy. 16 Mar. 2006 <<http://poetrytherapy.org/history.html>>. Hereafter cited as NAPT.

suspicious of its authenticity. When Macklin Smith tried to introduce his book to Social Workers, for instance, in hopes that they might integrate such literature into their treatment, he was refused.

Upon discovering the poetry of Joseph Daily at an art exhibit featuring the creative work of cancer survivors, I knew I had stumbled upon a creative art therapy that few people would appreciate. In an age when the trust in holistic health is at its all-time highest, the small amount of credible published literature on the healing power of poetry – especially for the ill – and the lack of support for poetry therapy surprised me⁵. However, recent literary research by Pennebaker et al. suggests that “emotionally expressive writing facilitates cognitive processing of traumatic memory, which leads to affective and physiological change” (Wright 283). The links between boosting the immune system and emotional disclosure in writing has also been recognized, signifying that the therapeutic uses of the literary arts are on a firm psychobiological foundation (Wright 283).⁶ This suggests that scientific evidence may be necessary to heighten the notoriety of poetry therapy and to convince those who are skeptical of the healing power of the disease lyric.

⁵ Remarkable projects based on the use of poetry to ameliorate the illness experience do exist. Carmelo Nadera, Jr. conducted an impressive project using poetry in mutual support groups of cancer survivors in metro Manila in the Philippines. However, when reading Nicholas Mazza’s book entitled *Poetry Therapy* we read only of the use of poetry therapy with suicidal adolescents, abused children, battered women, the grieving, the elderly, and with married couples. He does comment briefly on the Aids Poetry Project, providing a URL with which to access more information, but he does not dedicate any time to the use of therapeutic benefits of the use of poetry as he does with these other topics (<http://www.thebody.com/poetryproj/workbook2.html>). Overall, mental health professionals are not yet comfortable with how to handle poetry therapy for the ill.

⁶ Wright and Chung draw upon the work of Esterling and Lowe to make these assertions.

Appendix

Air Shatters in the Car's Small Room (Donald Hall WO)

Distracting myself
on the recliner between
Jane's hospital bed
and window, in this blue
room where we endure,
I set syllables
into prosy lines.
William Butler Years
denounced with passion
"the poetry of
passive suffering."
Friends and strangers
write letters speaking
of courage or strength.
What else could we do
except what we do?
Should we weep lying
flat? We do. Sometimes,
driving the Honda
with its windows closed
in beginning autumn
from the low motel
to Jane's bed, I scream
and keep on screaming.

Postcare: January 22nd (Donald Hall WO)

I grew heavy through summer and autumn
and now I bear your death. I feed her,
bathe her, rock her, and change her diapers.
She lifts her small skull, trembling
and tentative. She smiles, spits up, shits
in a toilet, learns to read and multiply.
I watch her grow, prosper, thrive.
She is the darling of her mother's old age.

Day 6: A Daughter's Visit
(Jane Yolen *RS*)

She has your nose, she has your chin,
She has my eyes, my hair.
So if you lose, I still can win
And keep you close and near.
I stare at her, she stares at you
When sleep, that smaller death,
Corrupts your face and takes you to
A world without a breath.
She and I, we breathe as one,
Cadencing the future count.
She's my blood, and she's my bone,
Measuring each small amount
As if we'd breath enough to share
To give you, love, along with care.

Heavenly Greeting
(Mattie *JTH*)

Dear God,
For a long time,
I have wondered about
How You will meet me
When I die and come to
Live with You in Heaven.
I know You reach out
Your hand to welcome
Your people into Your home
But I never knew if You
Reached out Your right hand,
Or if You
Reached out Your left hand.
But now I don't have to
Wonder about that anymore.
I asked my mommy and
She told me that You
Reach out both of Your hands,
And welcome us with
A great big giant hug.
Wow!
I can't wait for my hug, God.
Thank you,
Amen.

Let This Sadness
(Rick Fields *FYC*)

Let this sadness come
like the tide
through the sea-cave

Let this sadness run
wave upon wave
of tangled sea-weed

Let this sadness come
And then

Let this sadness go
And come
Again.

Koans? No, Queries
(Macklin Smith *TP*)

So is cancer
Natural
Or man-made?

If natural,
Environmental,
Or personal?

If environmental,
Natural
Or industrial?

If personal,
Self-inflicted
Or karmic?

If self-inflicted
Physical
Or mental?

If physical,
Dietary
Or genetic?

If genetic,
Chromosomal
Or karmic?

If mental,
Psychosomatic
Or neurotic?

If karmic
Ancestral
Or self-inflicted?

If ancestral,
Maternal
Or paternal?

If paternal,
Personal
Or accidental?

If maternal,
Man-made
Or Natural?

Untitled
(Joseph Daily)

let my heart
beat faster
heart beat faster
heartbeats faster
beat faster
than any
God-forsaken
thing
or rogue machine
that will demean
and keep it
.slow and steady.
.low and ready.
.susceptive to disease.

Untitled

Joseph daily

my teacher wears a scarf
every Tuesday and Thursday
though i only see her on
Tuesday and Thursday
so maybe it's just her routine

but today there was no scarf
but rather a turtleneck
which still leads me on to a conclusion

there must be something
wrong with her neck;
well perhaps not, but
maybe there's just something
she doesn't like about herself

and i'm afraid one day
if i'm angry with her or myself
i might lash out and ask her
why she always covers her throat

and i fear she would cry
at the realization that i twitch
and i don't know why and that
no one can help these things

and the power you can hold
over someone's head when you know
what it is they hate of themselves is
immeasurable

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