I Sing the Body Problematic:

Terror, Trauma, and Contemporary Poetry

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ABSTRACT: In The Denial of Death (1973), the anthropologist Ernest Becker posited that all humans harbor a repressed death anxiety called "terror." Terror can be made conscious by reminders of one's biological nature (i.e., creatureliness), but humans' unique ability to think symbolically mitigates concerns of creatureliness. Social psychologists established terror management theory (TMT) to empirically test Becker's propositions, specifically how culture arises as a means to distance humans from their base animal nature and offer figurative death transcendence. Poetry, a facet of culture that relies on symbolic thinking to chart even the most aversive human experiences, offers unique grounds to examine cultural ideas and practices regarding the body and death. This paper uses TMT principles to examine poetry collections by three contemporary authors, while comparing and contrasting primary concepts with those found in trauma theory, a genre of criticism that focuses on subjects' responses to and memories of imperiling external events.

Keywords: terror management theory, poetry, psychology, mortality, literature, Ernest Becker

To cite as:

Clague, Casey, 2019, "I Sing the Body Problematic: Terror, Trauma, and Contemporary Poetry," *PsyArt* 23, pp. 202-228.

"We are gods with anuses." - Ernest Becker

The predicament: to be a human with culture, complex emotions, and symbolic thinking, yet confined to a body that eats, defecates, copulates, and dies. In *The Denial of Death*, the anthropologist Ernest Becker details this uniquely human existential dilemma—life is finite, yet subjects wish to live forever. From this desire, humans construct cultural worldviews. Inasmuch as a culture outlasts an individual life, subjects can achieve figurative death transcendence by adhering to the prescribed behaviors and beliefs of their culture. Becker writes, "The hope and belief is that the things man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count" (1973, 5). However, despite thriving in a seemingly timeless culture, humans' bodily functions and inevitable mortality constantly remind them of their biological, impermanent nature, or "creatureliness". According to Becker, the knowledge of creatureliness induces "terror," a particular kind of existential anxiety that must be repressed in order for a subject to function in society.

Social psychologists Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski developed terror management theory (TMT) in the late 1980s as a means of empirically testing Becker's propositions. In the subsequent decades, many researchers have demonstrated that the creaturely human body poses a problem for subjects' ability to think of themselves as solely symbolic, with advanced cognitive functions that elevate them above mortality. Jamie Goldenberg writes, "One can deny, deny, deny; and only at the very end, or during a close encounter…be forced to reckon

with the truth of one's mortal existence. But the body—the bleeding, stinking body—offers a constant reminder of humankind's physical, and—by virtue of this—mortal, nature" (2012, 94). The denial of creatureliness can take many forms, including violence toward nonhuman animals, revulsion toward menstruation, pregnancy, and breastfeeding (because of their base biological nature), distaste for certain kinds of sex, and prejudice toward the elderly and individuals with disabilities. Overall, the body is a precarious vessel and humans must refute their transient and creaturely nature by any means necessary so that death does not overwhelm them with terror.

The necessity of culture for managing terror makes the arts an especially apt domain for research. Researchers Sarita Silveira et al. write, "…art provides a pathway for the self to transcend the very conditions that make death a threat, by allowing the self to liberate its thinking from mundane limitations and fears and achieving a connection with a more holistic level of meaning" (265). In addition to meaning making, art is a way of encapsulating the mores and customs that comprise a worldview. Anything from a pop-art painting of soup cans to a novel about a Russian family after the Napoleonic Wars can concretize the enduring, terror-averting aspects of a culture. There is also the practical benefit of creating a work that can carry a subject's name beyond the demise of their physical body. In a review of TMT studies on art, Landau, Sullivan, and Solomon posit that the academic maxim "publish or perish" is a kind of figurative death transcendence (116). In the TMT paradigm, anything that differentiates humans from animals, such as the ability to make art, is existentially comforting. Thus, art can also be seen as a direct action against creatureliness.

As a theoretical paradigm for reading literature, TMT's boundaries are somewhat blurred by trauma theory. Foundational trauma theorist Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur"

(1996, 91). Terror is likewise relegated to the unconscious. Because of its ability to incapacitate, the threat of death must be driven from proximal awareness into distal awareness where it can be dissipated by stringent worldview adherence. Trauma theory also examines the role of psychic experience in the formulation of culture. Sigmund Freud, on whose work trauma theory is based, proposed that when a culture does not have the psychological resources to process a traumatic event, it is driven into the unconscious where it manifests itself in "repetition compulsion." Freud cites the example of Jewish monotheism growing from their original trauma, the killing of their patriarch Moses (64-65). Later literary theorists have examined trauma within the postcolonial framework to demonstrate the traumatic impact of war on Arabic literature of the late 20th Century (Gana) and of racism on Toni Morrison's novel *Home* (Andermahr), to name just two examples. The collective findings show that the unconscious' drive to process trauma's unspeakability naturally manifests in the figurative language of literature in much the same way as terror management.

However, the two platforms differ in two main regards: first, trauma as defined by theorist Michelle Balaev pertains to "the extent of profound suffering from an external source, whether that source is an individual perpetrator or collective social practice" (2014, 1). In contrast, terror is a dilemma caused by an internal source, the mind itself, in response to impending mortality. While it can be made conscious by an external event, most often it is kept suppressed by existential defenses of the kind discussed later in this paper. Secondly, trauma occurs at the level of the individual (e.g., violence, sexual abuse) and social group (e.g., Holocaust survivors, colonized peoples); terror, as defined by Becker, is a universally human condition.

Still, that trauma and terror can—and often do—coexist in a single subject warrants the examination of some literary works as intersections of the two. The collections, *Stag's Leap*, Sharon Olds's experience with the dissolution of a thirty-year marriage, and Max Ritvo's *Four Reincarnations*, the poet's account of a cancer battle, occupy a space where trauma theory and TMT appear mutually applicable. The speakers in these collections have encountered traumatic events marked by "extreme emotional states and profound changes of perception" (Balaev 2012, 3) and ones that, from a TMT perspective, rupture existentially comforting systems of meaning. In this way, trauma and terror act upon a subject from similarly impactful, yet opposite directions—trauma from the past and terror in response to an event yet to come.

Four Reincarnations and *Stag's Leap*, along with Olds's *The Dead and the Living* and Sara Eliza Johnson's *Bone Map* demonstrate various ways that poetry can confront mortality concerns in order to manage the terror created thereby. Specifically, reinforcing human-nonhuman disparity, confronting issues related to copulation and romantic love, and openness to the experience of death all endow these collections with distinctive terror management capability. Given the universality of death anxiety, these insights can supplement areas in trauma theory that do not specifically pertain to death anxiety and be extrapolated to a new and compelling method for analyzing other works of literature.

The Body Creaturely

In TMT studies, participants demonstrate clear aversion to animalistic behaviors and functions when primed with thoughts of their own mortality. Goldenberg et al. write that participants for whom mortality was made salient (i.e., MS) demonstrated higher levels of disgust for bodily functions like defecation, envelope violations (i.e., unnatural openings in the body such as wounds), and certain animals (e.g., roaches, rats). The researchers state, "the disgust reaction is a

distal and symbolic means of coping with the problem of death" (2001, 430). Thus, any work of art that intentionally ventures into the territory of such animality offers a great deal of potential for terror management analysis.

Sara Eliza Johnson's poetry collection, *Bone Map*, is a relentless foray into the violent, earthly existence shared by humans and nonhumans. The landscapes in *Bone Map* are bleak and claustrophobic, written as though Johnson is aware that the more proximal the human/nonhuman relationship, the more terror is induced. Johnson's juxtapositions serve a similar function as the experimental manipulations in TMT research—they blur the terror-managing distinction between humans and nonhumans. Purposefully created though it is, this terror must be managed. Johnson's skill as a poet lies in her ability to stoke terror and soothe it just as quickly.

Johnson often accomplishes this in literal battle between humans and nonhumans. The poem "Märchen" (2014, 9-10), a reimagining of *Little Red Riding Hood*, extends the original ending; after being devoured by the wolf, the eponymous girl:

> …climbed out its belly
>
> *shining*, without a name—
> with only a red cap by which to call her
> and the animal guts in her hands. (2014, 10)

The ending serves as a symbolic victory for humans over nonhumans. The child shines despite being no doubt covered in viscera; she possesses the guts that once enveloped her. Similar victories are found elsewhere, as in "View From the Fence, On Which I Sit and Dangle My Legs":

> Horse with a broken leg,
>
> With a bullet in your head, I saw you
> in the stream last night…
>
> …You
> smelled of rifle-fire and cold. (2014, 15)

In “The Last Przewalski’s Horse”:

> The bullet cleaves a jagged path
>   through the tongue.
> The bullet carves a glow
>   in the skull, a black hole
> in the brain, and the eyes
>   roll up into the head. (2014, 19)

The hunter goes on to disembowel the animal, pull its teeth, pluck its hair, and boil its bones. He sells the pieces to a soldier, a curious boy, and a wolf herder, suggesting that humans across the social spectrum share in the dominion over nonhumans.

As Becker asserts, “Killing is a symbolic solution of a biological limitation…through the death of the other, one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying” (1973, 99). An individual may know the fact of their mortality, but the dominion over so-called lesser animals elevates humans above the simply creaturely, thereby imbuing their lives with perceived significance. Johnson sees a necessary connection between human and nonhuman violence. She states, “The animals and their viscerality, I think, serve to foreground the primal and feral urges, fears and desires in the human that modern society often attempts to hide, suppress, or redirect.” This connection offers a lens through which to view the human drive toward conflict. By exposing the previously hidden or suppressed, and knowing the origins of violence, one might hope to amend them.

The premise of animal-related violence offering insight into inter-human violence is reflected in TMT studies as well. However, instead of humans averting creaturely concerns with disparaging attitudes or physical brutality toward non-humans, other research demonstrates that framing violence as a creaturely act can, conversely, reduce subjects’ inclination to harm others. An article by Matt Motyl et al. (2013) demonstrates that after reminders of creatureliness, participants showed inhibited aggression in Study 2a by hitting a punching bag significantly

fewer times than did those in the non-creatureliness condition. In Study 3, participants for whom creatureliness was salient expressed lowered support for armed conflict against Iran. The researchers conclude that "priming human-animal similarities makes aggression existentially concerning" (662). Taken together, the studies show that experimental reminders of creatureliness prompt humans to disparage, reduce, or eliminate violent behaviors that are framed as animalistic.

In Johnson's poems, the proximity of human and nonhuman violence draws constant parallels between the two. The speakers and subjects in *Bone Map* feel the suffering of war and thus stand to benefit from the minimizing effect that creatureliness reminders have on human conflict. In "Deer Rub," the titular animal tears its forelock and antlers against a tree while the human world devolves into chaos: "children have begun to carry knives in their pockets," "a bomb strips away someone's skin," and, in a profoundly personal case of existential separation, "two people wake in a house and do not touch each other" (2014, 4-5). In the prose poem "Confession," boys play baseball with an animal femur as a bat and a blackbird as a ball. "All around them, bombs break the roofs of houses, break the cathedral glass and the cloud, break the shawled head of a woman, break the stone road apart, and the carriage horse's back" (2014, 17). In this piece, the human-animal hierarchy is self-perpetuating; from the initial game comes more human devastation, which in turn enacts new violence upon animals.

Despite—or perhaps because of—all of this, humans and animals reach an existential equilibrium. In "Equinox," the collection's final poem, the speaker has a nurturing relationship with animals who have likewise suffered from the preceding carnage. The speaker states,

> The horses there are unkempt, obscured by pink blots of mange.
> They walk all morning, catching flies in their ribs. (2014, 60)

Nonetheless, the speaker reveres them, saying:

I know their teeth could sever my fingers.
I know their hooves
could break through my chest.
I know the inscription of their breath
is an invisible benediction. (2014, 60)

With this war-wearied respect, the speaker assumes care for the horses, which leads to a kind of cosmic bond where death has lost its finality and terrorizing effect:

Today I'll groom these animals,
Though they aren't mine.
Tomorrow I'll plant a garden
and in four months bring them carrots.
Soon the whitest sky will shatter, haphazardly
plant its crystal in our skin.
Then the dead will walk. (2014, 60)

This connection ultimately restores the speaker's humanity:

And I will come by your house, carrying
bread, eggs, apples. Milk colder than moon. (2014, 60)

As in TMT research, the human-nonhuman relationships in *Bone Map* can be mutually antagonistic, but navigating them with an eye toward peaceful coexistence can temper the terrorizing effects of mortality.

Johnson's more recent work goes beyond the human-nonhuman relationship and the foregone conclusion of individuals' deaths to the supreme death: extinction of the human species. Her new poems ask readers to "locate and recognize human traces within inhuman vastness" and consider the "ecological echoes humans will leave on the planet" (2017). One example of this comes from "Wormhole" (2018):

Now the trees are shadows burned
into wind, as if frozen mid-implosion.

My hands won't move
but my wrist vein wrinkles with a pulse

and I hear the blood
in the shadow I am in this forest:

all of us shadows in rows, growing like roots
down from the white lake of sky.

The trees, as a metonym for the natural world, have been burned black, yet the sound of blood resonates. Though the collective "us" is shadow similar to the trees, the human species continues growing like roots. Perhaps this is the ultimate terror management: the comfort that even after death brought about by humans' own folly, and absent the culture and symbolic thinking that sets us apart from nonhumans, our species will endure. Despite creaturely bodies and perceived existential meaninglessness, humans' dominion over Earth persists.

Although symbolic violence against animals may resolve humans' creatureliness quandary with respect to terror, it catalyzes an analysis of trauma within animal studies. Kari Weil states that since "nonhuman animals cannot speak for themselves, or at least they cannot speak the languages that the academy recognizes as necessary for such self-representation," the onus of representation falls on scholars who have an interest in maintaining justice between humans and nonhumans (2). Unfortunately, even when nonhumans do feature in literary analyses, it is typically without the moral agency ascribed to their human counterparts. Anastassiya Andrianova argues that a problematic trend exists in literary studies: analyses that seem animal-centric are typically human-centric in that readers focus on what animals can teach humans about themselves (2). Quoting Josephine Donovan, Andrianova writes that in literature, "Circumstantial realities of the animals themselves are largely ignored so that the perceived pathos of their condition may be used to illustrate the mental state or moral condition of the humans" (11). As seen in TMT, denying nonhumans' moral status often leads to violence against them. A more just approach would foreground the trauma of animals within the text. A future analysis of *Bone Map* or thematically similar works may pose several questions: What unique tribulations and pains do nonhumans endure in the text and what are their physical and

psychological responses? What linguistic features in the text reveal oppressive beliefs regarding animals? What estimations of nonhumans' moral worth (or lack thereof) facilitate their violent treatment in literature? How does this treatment translate to human action against nonhumans in the real world? In *Bone Map*, Johnson has already drawn the moral and existential parallels between humans and nonhumans that would serve as the basis for such studies.

The Body Sexual

Reproductive functions are problematic from a terror management perspective since they are undeniable commonalities shared by humans and nonhumans. Menstruation, pregnancy, and breastfeeding are particularly repelling to participants in TMT studies. Goldenberg states, "the reproductive aspects of women's bodies can provoke a threat that is exacerbated by experimental primes highlighting the awareness of human mortality and/or creatureliness" (2012, 100). The sexual act itself is also complicated by awareness of creatureliness and mortality. Ruth Beatson and Michael Halloran presented participants with an essay describing human and nonhuman copulation as basically similar; participants for whom mortality was made salient rated the author of the essay as unlikable and unintelligent, and they fervently disagreed with the essay's statements (2007). In another study by Goldenberg et al., participants in the MS group gave unfavorable ratings to the physical aspects of sex, such as feeling their genitals respond sexually and feeling their partner's sweat on their body (1999, 1178). A later study by Goldenberg et al. demonstrates that subjects have greater desire for romantic sex over casual sex as a means to alleviate mortality concerns. The authors write, "Love ameliorates the anxiety surrounding sex by transforming our sexual urges into a highly abstract, uniquely human connection with another individual" (2000, 206). Together, these studies present a comprehensive view that humans need

to instill sex with symbolic meaning in order to avoid its terror inducing potential. As Becker says, "sex and death are twins…animals who procreate die" (1973, 163).

Few poets confront the terrorizing fact of biological functions as directly as Sharon Olds. In "The Moment" from *The Dead and the Living*, the speaker menstruates unashamedly:

> "I've got my period, Mom," I said,
> and I saw your face abruptly break open and
> glow with joy… (1984, 42)

The speaker in "New Mother" lactates equally without reservation:

> …my milk undid its
> burning slip-knot through my nipples,
> soaking my shirt… (1984, 53)

From a terror management perspective, these corporeal images are particularly troublesome. Goldenberg states that since women's bodies are more obviously creaturely by virtue of their reproductive functions, they more readily engender terror than do men's bodies (2012, 98). Olds uses the female body to arouse and agitate existential anxiety in her audience. By claiming and utilizing in poetry the otherwise terror-inducing aspects of the female body, their power is diminished.

Like all of the bodily functions in her work, Olds speaks of sex explicitly. In "The Connoisseuse of Slugs," Olds metaphorically connects the titular animal with the male phallus. The speaker states:

> I gasped with pleasure to see that quiet
> mystery reenacted, the slow
> elegant being coming out of hiding… (1984, 51)

Olds often goes beyond the baseline—although still graphic—details of sex into more brutal imagery. In "New Mother," the speaker relays her first sexual encounter after giving birth:

> …your sex dry and big,
> all of you so tender, you hung over me,
> over the nest of stitches, over the

splitting and tearing… (1984, 53)

In “Poem to My First Lover,” the speaker describes how the man

…took her,
deflowering her as you’d gut a fish… (1984, 52)

Sex is not devoid of pathos in Olds’s poems, but it is just as often a savage, animalistic endeavor.

While Olds’s body-focused poems confront the terror of mortality, her dedication to imbuing sex with love works to mitigate death anxiety. As liberated as are her attitudes about sex, Olds is not in it for sport. There is an inextricable spiritual element in the act, as exemplified in “Sex Without Love”:

How do they do it, the ones who make love
without love? (1984, 57)

Becker states that coupling feelings of love and attachment with sex is important because doing so suffuses an animalistic act with symbolic meaning, thereby strengthening the terror-managing disparity between humans and nonhumans (1973, 163). Results from experiments by Cathy Cox and Jamie Arndt show that romantic relationships play a key role in assuaging death anxiety inasmuch as they provide individuals with a sense of greater interpersonal connectedness (2012). The authors write, “Because significant others are often the vehicles that transmit important elements of the worldview, perceiving that one is valued by those close others places one more firmly within the security of one’s cultural beliefs” (617).

Unfortunately for Olds, the depth of feeling associated with sex opens her to profound heartbreak. Her collection *Stag’s Leap* recounts the termination of her thirty-year marriage. Trauma is evident early on in “Unspeakable,” when the speaker’s husband reveals he has fallen for someone else. The speaker responds:

And sometimes I feel as if, already,

> I am not here – to stand in his thirty-year
> sight and not in love's sight,
> I feel an invisibility (2012, 4)

The relationship is not just of great emotional importance; it comprises a majority of the speaker's identity concept. Olds goes farther in "*Frontis Nulla Fides"*:

> I feel that ignorant love
> gave me a life (29).

In this way, the husband's infidelity is an exponentially destructive event—it traumatizes Olds not just at the emotional level, but also ruptures the existential defenses offered by the relationship.

Yet, even given the husband's betrayal, the speaker still feels a loving connection. In "While He Told Me," immediately after the husband's confession, the couple makes love (2012, 3). The speaker then follows her husband to the couch and rests her head on his lap while he reads. It is a tender moment rendered even more profound by the disconsolate context. Later, in "Last Look," despite the pain he caused, the speaker expresses compassion for her husband:

> In the last minute of our marriage, I looked into
> his eyes. All day until then, I had been
> comforting him, for the shock he was in
> at his pain… (2012, 13)

In "What Left?" the speaker arrives at an enlightened appreciation of the marriage:

> …We fulfilled something in each other –
> I believed in him, he believed in me, then we
> grew, and grew… (2012, 89)

Ultimately, assisted by poetry's penchant for paradox, Olds is able to at once mourn the relationship and find the value despite its trauma.

The narrative in *Stag's Leap*, devastating as it was for its author, also offers a terror managing benefit. Goldenberg et al. write, "Monogamous love implies that another person views

us as having such great value to be worth ‘forsaking all others’ and committing himself or herself entirely to us. The more valuable the one who loves us, the greater the impact of his or her love on our self-worth” (2000, 207). Further, a couple is not simply two people; they are together part of a culturally validated system of meaning (i.e., love) in a broader society that persists beyond an individual’s ultimate death. Even though the relationship in *Stag’s Leap* ends, the terror-mitigating effect of it remains by virtue of its encapsulation in a poetry collection. The symbolic importance of the marriage has been replaced (or supplemented) by the enduring potential of the text.

The Body Mortal

One’s fundamental impermanence is evident in their vulnerability to illness. Goldenberg and Arndt pioneered the Terror Management Health Model (TMHM) with an article that proposes in part that thoughts of death can cause one to more avidly adopt health-preserving measures (e.g., applying sunscreen) to manage the terror of the mortal body (2008). In contrast, Morris et al. note that terror of the mortal body can lead to health-damaging behaviors (e.g. smoking cigarettes, using tanning supplies) when the subject derives cultural validation from the act. Citing previous research, Morris et al. assert that whether or not the subject’s actions promote or damage health, it is specifically concerns about vulnerability to the health risk that guide decision-making (2018, 380). Given how terror-inducing disease is, one might expect willing explorations of it to be minimal. Poetry, however, does not flinch in these circumstances.

Max Ritvo deftly faces this threat in his collection *Four Reincarnations* (2016a). The poems detail Ritvo’s struggle with Ewing’s sarcoma, a rare and deadly form of cancer. Ritvo’s poems do not frequently elicit platitudes like “hopeful” and “brave” that are usually given to accounts of terminal illness. Although they do embody those qualities just by virtue of their

subject, Ritvo's poems take them as a starting point, building on them a more holistic view of the process of death and dying.

Over the course of its thirty-seven poems, *Four Reincarnations* covers a spectrum of death-related emotions. The speaker in "Dawn of Man" is empowered:

> …wishes aren't afraid
> to take on their own color and life—
>
> like a boy who takes a razor from a high cabinet,
> puffs out his cheeks, and strips them bloody. (2016a, 17)

In "Poem Set in the Day and Night" on the other hand, the speaker is reverent:

> You can enjoy anything—you don't remember
> how clumsy the old hands were, how picky the tongue. (2016a, 43)

The speaker of "Plush Bunny," is resigned:

> My poor little future,
> you could probably fit in a shoebox. (2016, 54)

In "Afternoon," death is just another quotidian event:

> When I was about to die
> my body lit up
> like when I leave my house
> without my wallet. (2016, 50)

Taken together, the poems in *Four Reincarnations* present a vision of death that is free of affect and bravado. Instead, Ritvo's generosity of spirit invites the reader into an experience where terror has lost its ground.

This attitude is no doubt aided by Ritvo's Buddhist practice. In an interview with Kaveh Akbar in *Divedapper*, Ritvo recounts a childhood of being taught meditation by his mother and stepfather, and a house containing Tibetan singing bowls that he could "play the universe with." He goes on to say, "In terms of *Four Reincarnations*, Buddhism happened in my college years. During my second existential anxiety in my senior year, I started meditating regularly"

(2016b). The benefit of meditation-derived equanimity is reflected many times in *Four Reincarnations*, as in "Poem to My Litter": "Even my suffering is good, in part" (2016a, 15). Likewise, in "When I Criticize You, I'm Just Trying to Criticize the Universe":

> My body's voices, normally so quarrelsome,
> grow warm and weepy, and start
> to sing together "Take Me to the Water." (2016a, 36)

Through meditation, the mind makes peace with what the body can't help but do.

TMT researchers Christopher Niemiec et al. show that simple mindfulness practice can minimize worldview defense, which then ameliorates existential dread. As opposed to worldview defense, which indicates personal anxiety and leads to denigration of outgroups, mindfulness offers a positive means of bolstering conceptions of the self and for confronting terror. In Study 6, the team found that participants who scored high on a trait mindfulness measure wrote of their death longer in an open-ended free-writing task. In Study 7, the participants higher in trait mindfulness showed lowered death-thought accessibility after an MS prime. Niemiec et al. also draw parallels between mindfulness and openness to experience stating that both "[allow] for an accurate perception of reality without distortion or avoidance" (2010, 363). For Ritvo, meditation resolves the barriers to poetry threatened by terror, making death instead a site for exploration.

Four Reincarnations is not as explicitly indicative of trauma as is *Stag's Leap*, yet it more readily embodies the physical detriments that engender trauma that are absent in Olds' poems. As Carruth states, the original use of the word "trauma" referred to a wound inflicted on the body (1996, 3). Likewise, terror arises from the body's essential frailty. Ritvo's work, rooted as it is in the imperiled body, exists at the intersection of trauma and terror—his cancer makes clear the immanence of death and marks with trauma what time he has left. This location represents an important convergence of the two theoretical perspectives: that each results in an

unconscious inability to reconcile an event or concept and one's emotional response to it. Poetry for Ritvo is a means to bring the damage into consciousness and make meaning of what he finds.

In the experimental psychology literature, Mystakidou et al. detail the concept of preparatory grief as a function of trauma in advanced cancer patients. According to the researchers, "Patients may mourn the changes in their physical and mental capacities, or how their role in the family will change as they become more debilitated" (2011, 512). *Four Reincarnations*, as a document of mourned changes, shows a poet grappling to prepare for an event for which preparation is ultimately futile. As Ritvo writes in "The Big Loser," "All of death is *right here*" (58). In this collection, Ritvo's mental state and marriage comprise the primary sites of the poet's grief that arises from his terminal illness.

Anxieties about Ritvo's mental faculties permeate *Four Reincarnations*. Some poems, like "The End" in which Ritvo writes of a world of loss with "the imagination sizzling on top of it" (63) show the poet celebrating a mind that prevails despite its trauma. However, more often Ritvo's mind is a source of turmoil. In "The Senses," Ritvo writes of recurring thoughts where each

> …sours into yet
>
> another picture of dissatisfaction,
> that loves to be thought,
>
> another pear, ugly
> as the head
> of a man who is thinking. (6)

In "To Randal, Crow Stealer, Lord of the Greenhouse," Ritvo writes, "Do you pity my imagination? It will kill you" (25). Ritvo understands that mortality is an end he must ultimately face on his own; he despairs that his tumultuous mind could alienate those who would accompany him along the way. In "Black Bulls," a poem in which his mind is disjointed and

restless as three black bulls on three separate sand hills, Ritvo goes so far as to write, “I am so sorry that you have come to this mind of mine” (19). That Ritvo’s mind laments its own workings generates a sort of negative feedback loop—he needs symbolic thinking to work through trauma and alleviate the terror of death, yet he believes the strangeness of his thoughts will push away anyone who encounters them. That this may cost Ritvo the existential comfort of being loved or his poetry being read thrusts him into more occasions in which to rely on symbolic thinking.

Four Reincarnations devotes many lines to his wife Victoria, celebrating their love despite grieving over the cancer’s impact on their relationship. In one instance, Ritvo writes,

> We are becoming a bulb
> in the ground of the living
> in the winter of being alive. (“Heaven is Us Being a Flower Together,” 49)

In “Poem About My Wife Being Perfect and Me Being Afraid” love’s generative effect on life is more absolute: “Thou art me before I am myself” (35). As with Olds’ *Stag’s Leap*, the love relationship provides an additive effect to Ritvo’s humanity—the couple is more than the sum of its parts. However, unlike Olds, augmenting through love the isolated self does not provide Ritvo peace. On the contrary, the trauma of illness keeps the poet fixated on the ways his deteriorating body precludes a transcendent connection:

> I wish you would let me know
> how difficult it is to love me. (“Living it Up,” 3)

In *Four Reincarnations*, love and acceptance offer Ritvo existential comfort, but the trauma of his cancerous body makes any conciliatory efforts hollow. Although the equilibrium of meditation and the threat of mortality compel Ritvo to poetry, his illness embroils him in a struggle he never fully reckons with.

Sadly, Max Ritvo died in August 23, 2016, at the age of 25. Ritvo's estate released *The Final Voicemails*, a collection of other poems written during his illness—and portions of his undergraduate thesis from Yale—in late 2018. In the introduction to *The Final Voicemails,* Ritvo's mentor, Louise Glück, writes, "Cancer was Max's tragedy; it was also, as he was canny enough to see, his opportunity. Poets who die at twenty-five do not commonly leave bodies of work…so desperately alive" (2018). Like the death poems of the early Zen masters with whom Ritvo shared a faith, Ritvo's work presents a picture of equanimity in the face of what could otherwise incapacitate with terror and trauma.

Conclusion

Becker asserts that an individual's mission in society is essentially a hero-project: "[Man] must justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out, be a hero, make the biggest possible contribution to world life, show that he *counts* more than anything or anyone else" (1973, 4). Through this kind of recognition, the subject achieves figurative death transcendence. Landau, Sullivan, and Solomon state that creativity has a complex relationship with terror management. On one hand, in the pursuit of originality, artists run the risk of alienating themselves from the existential comfort of belonging to a collective (2010, 131-132). However, this threat was ameliorated in another study by Arndt et al. wherein participants whose feelings of social connectedness were bolstered showed greater willingness to participate in a creative task (2005). In a social climate that privileges some and disadvantages others, it is difficult to predict whether an artist will produce work of their highest ability as a function of social connectedness and death anxiety. Still, one might reasonably conclude that those who do blossom in the arts are more actively involved—consciously or not—in the hero project.

However, firm conclusions are troubled by the fact that terror's relationship to creativity also includes the matter of individual characteristics. Neuroticism, one of the Big Five personality traits, is well researched within TMT. In a study by Andrea Ycaza, Scott M. Hyman, and Samantha Behbahani, highly neurotic individuals were more likely to complete a word stem measure with death-related words, regardless of whether mortality was made salient (2012). Neuroticism has also been shown by Huimin Xu and Merrie Brooks to greatly moderate the connection of terror to participation in creative tasks, such that high-neuroticism individuals are less inclined toward creativity and experience higher levels of guilt after creativity when mortality is salient (2011). Whereas the perception of the neurotic artist as a paragon of creativity might prevail, TMT research indicates that the opposite is true. Without methodological study of each poet's particular personality qualities and their direct responses to a mortality salience and/or creatureliness prime, it is presumptuous to say with certainty what role death anxiety played in their poetry.

Anxiety buffer disruption theory (ABDT) is another element to consider in literary studies of trauma and terror. As a subfield of TMT, ABDT specifically examines the impact of trauma on a subject's existential defenses. Formulated by Tom Pyszczynski and Pelin Kesebir, and expounded on by other researchers in many studies since, ABDT proposes that extremely traumatic experiences rupture buffers against terror, including worldview defense and close relationships. The researchers state that, in the case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), "the anxiety-buffering mechanisms … have been rendered ineffective by the trauma" (7). Once these fractures occur, experimental evidence from this and other studies shows that individuals who score high on a measure of PTSD actually exhibit lower inclination to bolstering their anxiety buffers after an MS prime. The implication of ABDT suggests that Olds and Ritvo, if

traumatized to a degree that led to PTSD, might be less disposed to writing about their experiences, since art is also an anxiety buffer. However, one might conclude that since Olds and Ritvo *did* write about their experiences, their trauma might only have been experienced to a mild or moderate degree, compared to one strong enough to elicit post-traumatic stress. Ultimately, as with the matter of neuroticism, an individual's level of experienced trauma cannot be assumed; absent empirical study, any conclusion about one's psychic levels of trauma and terror remains a matter of conjecture. Still, literary analysis depends to a large degree on its ability to bind the subjectivity of the reader with a commonly accepted history of research such that one can favor generalizability in place of rigid empirical data.

Perhaps it is the particular benefit of poetry that allows the writer to toe so closely to the existentially threatening. Poetry is driven by empathy, which can be seen as a form of social connectedness stated by Arndt et al. (1999) as requisite for art to manage terror. Poet Kaveh Akbar states, "I think that we write poems to each other to communicate our unprecedented experiences. If we're trying to communicate those, it requires a great amount of empathy to receive those thoroughly." Poetry is also driven by fearlessness and dedication to mapping the human experience, no matter its precariousness and looming finality. Poets classic and contemporary connect death to verse. In "To a Poet Who Died Young," Edna St. Vincent Millay speaks of how death imbues poetry with meaning:

> Many a bard's untimely death
> Lends unto his verses breath. (1921, 52)

Johnson states succinctly, "Poetry would disappear without the fear of death". As a unique marker of culture, poetry simultaneously resists death, draws power from it, and offers a means to symbolically transcend it.

Thus far, terror management theory has been the domain of experimental social psychology. Strict methodology and hard data concretize Becker's positions, which might otherwise seem to rely too much on supposition. Peer-reviewed studies are much preferred over the subjectivity of literary analysis. Still, there was a time when Freud's and other psychoanalysts' work was confined to the therapist's couch. Over a century later, myriad scholars have applied psychoanalytic theory to the reading of literature, producing some of the most enlightened and influential explications of classic and contemporary literature. Trauma theory as well has already been afforded a place in the analytical canon. Perhaps it is time to bring terror management theory out of the lab and into the library. Since trauma is a residue of the past and terror is a portent of the future, a multidirectional approach would be appropriate in literary analysis. In short, terror management literary theory can pick up where trauma theory leaves off.

Culture endures, while subjects' methods for making meaning within that culture remain in flux. Artistic modes and values shift as a consequence of economic and social conditions. Environmental research and animal studies continue to recast humans' relationships with the rest of the planet. New developments in technology and medicine have extended life expectancy to greater years than any other time in history. Still, within all of this, the terror of death remains. A terror management literary theory would examine the simultaneous antagonisms and ameliorative functions of literature as a means of confronting and/or transcending death anxiety. Terror management literary theory could locate within texts the same effects of mortality that researchers find in experimental psychology studies. Writers of poetry, fiction, memoir, or any other genre all share the commonality of imminent death. Such a predicament can be terrifying, but it can also be generative of that which makes us the most human.

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