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Marilyn Hacker's Cancer Poems

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Although Marilyn Hacker's 1994 collection *Winter Numbers* attempts to come to terms with the death of friends from cancer and AIDS, as well as with her own experience of breast cancer, it begins with a poem of apparent resistance, "Against Elegies". The poem's first lines are not simply an expression of hope, that elegy will not be required, but also an assessment of the form's capabilities: "James has cancer. Catherine has cancer. / Melvin has AIDS. / Whom will I call, and get no answer?" (11). Hacker appeals to an increasingly smaller group of friends who could offer emotional support, in an invocation echoing those conventionally made near the beginning of an elegy: here poets may call a community to mourn together — "O weep for Adonais!" (Shelley 531) — seek assistance in their undertaking — "Strong son of God, Immortal Love ..." (Tennyson 5) — or demand why death was not prevented — "Where were ye, nymphs?" (Milton 50). Hacker's question is a challenge to elegy: the stark rhyme of "cancer" / "answer" suggests that the genre itself may not be up to the task of providing redress for these epidemic diseases and epidemic grief. Yet there is still a need to assimilate or overcome, to generate a sustaining "answer" to cancer and AIDS; although it may yield nothing here, the rhyme forms the beginning of an attempt to bring the destructiveness of these diseases to poetic order.

Winter Numbers is constant in its concern over elegiac process, as it searches for what David Kennedy calls "an operative language" (77-78). It is not just the large number of deaths that places elegy under the strain of generating an "answer", but also what has caused the deaths. Although it acknowledges the devastation caused by AIDS, *Winter Numbers'* primary focus is on cancer. Cancer is problematic for elegy, for a number of conceptual, mimetic and ethical reasons. Cancer's attention to physical forms makes elegists consider poetic forms, how the elegy itself is an organic structure, whose end in one sense replays the death of its subject, and in which the patterning of rhyme and metre can present the relentless repetitions of this disease. Generically, fertility is the elegy's desired

destination, in the locating of some pattern of regeneration—— in nature, memory, or poetry—— that matches or indeed enables the reassertion of the life instinct. But since the principles of creativity, reproduction and boundlessness are also the properties of cancer, an aesthetic problem may be that in seeking to produce the immortal—— or at least the enduring—— from mortal materials, much of what elegists would conventionally do mimics the disease. When coming to terms with one's own traumatic experience, cancer poetry may employ tropes of distancing and stasis rather than internalization, given that recovery consists of the absence of the cancerous from the body. Ethically, as well, cancer poets may face restrictions in their choice of metaphors, restrictions which Susan Sontag and others have described: if it is unethical to use cancer metaphorically, it is very difficult for a poet to modify the real into the artifice of memory and consolation; even if such a tendency may be inevitable, a poet may be reluctant to assent to it.

Under this weight of limitations and paradoxes, it is possible to appreciate why *Winter Numbers* often struggles in its search for an effective poetics, and why so many of its poems cannot assert a resolute surpassing, but rather submit to the provisional. In depicting her recovery from breast cancer, Hacker borrows from the processes of elegy, namely the movement from loss to substitution, figuration and the reassertion of the life instinct. The collection and its keystone, the “Cancer Winter” sequence of sonnets, attempt to establish a body of ethics, to identify precisely what is permissible and possible in representing cancer and cancer deaths. This essay will address the ethical and mimetic binds which restrict the representation of that recovery; it will assess whether it is possible to document the experience of cancer accurately and ethically at the same time, as the poems negotiate between the physical and metaphysical worlds; and it will seek to account for the intensity of the poet's ethical commitment. It may be that the self-protective impulse of elegy and cancer poetry is irreconcilable with an impeccable ethical fastidiousness.

Hacker begins *Winter Numbers* by positioning her suffering in relation to others. Rather than alleviating pain, this process allows her to examine the ethical probity of her poetics, something that requires an assessment of cancer at this point in history; in “Against Elegies” she announces that

 this was another century
 in which we made death humanly obscene:
 Soweto El Salvador Kurdistan

Armenia Shatila Baghdad Hanoi
Auschwitz. Each one, unique as our lives are,
taints what's left with complicity,
makes everyone living a survivor
who will, or won't bear witness for the dead. (14)

While it strives to be declarative, the poem is underpinned by uncertainty. Hacker implies that mourning cancer deaths may seem less of a priority than coming to terms with “obscene” political crises. Of the three contentions here — that death has become “obscene” in the twentieth century, that everyone who has not died in an atrocity is “complicit []” with those atrocities, and that therefore each “survivor” chooses whether or not to speak for those who have died — the first is perhaps the most unstable, and it demonstrates the difficulty of producing an ethical elegy, even when a poet has the best intentions. Since the definition of the word remains constant, it seems questionable to affirm that more recent massacres are more horrific than older ones, or, as a consequence, that death has become more rather than less unconscionable.¹ But how does sociology relate to the ethics of poetry? If indeed death has become more obscene, then commemorative poetry has a problem; Peter Sacks argues towards the end of his psychoanalytic study of elegy that

recent attitudes toward death have made it increasingly difficult to write a conventional elegy. Sociologists and psychologists, as well as literary and cultural historians, consistently demonstrate the ways in which death has tended to become obscene, meaningless, impersonal — an event either stupefyingly colossal in cases of large-scale war or genocide, or clinically concealed somewhere behind the technology of the hospital and the techniques of the funeral home. (Sacks 299)

Sacks's rhetoric is persuasive, but it is difficult for something to be “obscene” and “meaningless” at the same time. If death has become “impersonal”, it seems reasonable to contend that grief is always felt personally, that each grief is, in Hacker's word, “unique”.

1 Until the mid-eighteenth-century, life expectancies suggest that human life was obscenely cheap; survival rates from cancer today are higher than they ever have been.

Genocide may be inassimilable, because there cannot strictly be mourning for those with whom no personal connection existed, and because suffering is always processed on a personal level, the intimate rather than the epochal. In increasing the scale of the suffering, poetry risks becoming less capable of engaging our limited conceptual ability and sympathy, and therefore less successful in its moral impact. Hacker's assertion of the need for "everyone living" to "bear witness" to atrocities is an impossible ethical standard, one that is revealed aesthetically. If death has become "obscene" because it is so common, and indistinct — and therefore possibly dismissable — these atrocities should be made distinct and separate; the lack of punctuation runs them all together, even though they have hugely different causes and hugely different death tolls. Each is relegated into one general condition of "atrociousness". If part of the description's intention is to protect the integrity and acuity of suffering in each case, this is very difficult if "everyone living", whether involved or not, has the same level of knowledge and the same range of emotions about all of these events as everyone else.

However, it is precisely the fear of being unethical which leads Hacker to take on too much responsibility. By asking "Who dies well?" (15) later in the poem, Hacker acknowledges that however endemic or rare it may be, death is always shocking, and therefore always requires the kind of assimilation that elegy can offer. But why does Hacker feel the need for such positioning — the need to come to terms with her cancer and others' deaths from cancer in a flawlessly ethical way? Additionally, if Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* contends that "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability", which it ensures "through its resistance to language" (4), why is Hacker's adjustment to cancer fundamentally social? There seem to be four major reasons. Firstly, the physical security offered by surgery and chemotherapy is not robust or encompassing enough to sustain psychological health: Hacker requires the emotional support offered by a community of sufferers in facing the disease. There is little description of physical pain in "Cancer Winter", of the suffering involved in cancer and chemotherapy, but the importance of the metaphysical and its vulnerability (the group, metaphysical figures, poetry) is suggested indirectly in sonnet 10, where life is reduced to the purely physical and Hacker must negotiate life alone: "bald" trees "wane by a river drained to sluggish mud", the setting sun looks like "blood", as the poet has been drained out of herself, looking at herself as a husk, in the second person; she ends with a frail plea: "Your voice petitions the indifferent night: / 'I don't know how to die yet. Let me live'" (86). Against the indifference and dying pattern of the world, the poet hopes for regeneration, but does not know if

she will survive the winter to assert the regenerative trope of pastoral elegy.

The second reason for *Winter Numbers*' social method is that the magnitude of Hacker's experience must, for her, mean more than the simple arrangement and rearrangement of cells: pain must be expressed. Thirdly, foregrounding her ethical commitment to a group — attesting to others' suffering, and hesitating to write about her personal suffering — may be a means for Hacker to assuage guilt at having survived cancer while others did not, and at the possibility of asserting recovery too forcefully in the presence of other survivors. Hacker attests to this guilt in her "Journal Entries", published in an anthology of writing on breast cancer: on January 4th 1993, she makes a plea, attesting to the demands upon her:

Let me write another book, let me face down the elegies a different way.
Right now, when I read those poems, they seem like an affront to women
and men who *have* had cancer, who are alive with their scars, with their
nightmares, with their courage, with whatever else I don't know, or don't
know yet. Another set of mastectomy poems, chemotherapy (if necessary)
poems, can't you all be quiet? ("Journal Entries" 210)

The final stimulus for the collection's method is the need to assert political aggression, since it may provide a metaphysical weapon against a physical enemy, which, although limited, is the only kind of volition available to the poet: no metaphysical identification with a group can give her absolute support against cancer, yet it is a need she still feels.

Fidelity to a group is consonant with the attempt to locate accurate and effective metaphorical correlatives for experience. The range of figurative language available to the poet is thus also limited by its ethical commitment not to betray reality or other sufferers. One such figure from "Year's End", which prefaces the "Cancer Winter" sequence, presents breast cancer patients as both empowered and disempowered, in an address to institutional complacency:

tell me, senators, what you call abnormal?
Each day's obits read as if there's a war on.
Fifty-eight-year-old poet dead of cancer:
warrior woman

laid down with other warrior women. (76)

For Hacker, the high level of breast cancer fatalities in North American society should not be allowed to become acceptable; the frequency's abnormality is suggested by the strangeness of the metaphor, since a 58-year-old woman would not usually be fighting a war in this period of history, and by the insistence that 58 is a young age to die. These women are fighting unnecessarily, and just as abbreviating "obituaries" to "obits" elicits a concern over linguistic propriety, introducing this martial metaphor carries with it the range of ethical questions concerning the representation of illness that have preoccupied critics including Susan Sontag. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag objected that figures similar to Hacker's in 'Year's End' impute an inaccurate sense of agency (if you don't fight, you won't survive), and inaccurate values (the goodness of a cure or victory compared to the evil of a death or defeat); in this way such vocabulary causes unwarranted suffering in patients, since "The people who have the real disease are also hardly helped by hearing their disease's name constantly dropped as the epitome of evil" (85), Sontag wrote.² However, the contention that all martial metaphors do damage is difficult to uphold here, since Sontag's approach advocates protection of those who may not be offended. As Hacker suggests, cancer patients may gain a sense of empowerment — however illusory or ultimately ineffective — from describing their feelings in martial ways. Sontag's imperative that there are "some metaphors we might well abstain from or try to retire" (93) negates patients' freedom to determine the representation of their experience. In poetry, attempting to limit or abolish certain metaphors is inevitably a limiting of the imagination. Cancer becomes an untouchable subject commanding decorum and a restriction in representation and interpretation.

Not all martial metaphors for cancer are necessarily unethical — and it may be that an unethical metaphor can have ethical effects — but it is important to test the ethical integrity, and the plausibility, of each one. It is also necessary to establish what a metaphor is and does. In her book *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer*, Jackie Stacey turns to Peggy Phelan for a definition of how metaphor "works by erasing dissimilarity and negative difference; *it turns two into one*" (Phelan 150). Based on a

2 One of the difficulties with Sontag's objections is the assumption that wars draw on implicitly ethical discourse, the good against the bad. Of course not all wars are wars of morality; very few can divide up in this way.

perceptual similarity, two separate things are joined together, but this is still somewhat an assertion of falsity, since the two things are not identical. For Hacker to suggest that physically cancer sufferers are warriors is inaccurate: cancer treatment is characterized not by activity but by passivity, and there is no volition within each atom of cancer or anti-cancer chemicals. Only metaphysically can there be a struggle, but Hacker's warrior metaphor conflates two "enemies", the disease and the political, thereby making the physical and the metaphysical equivalent: the deaths from cancer constitute a protest against these deaths.³ The conflation renders the defeat of one inanimate enemy dependent on defeating the resistance or callousness of the other, national policy.

As it stands, the warrior metaphor is fatal: bound by this metaphor, the women are bound to lose. The metaphor and its associated vocabulary are the problem. Governmental policy that invests public money in the military rather than the medicinal makes these women unwilling and unsuccessful combatants, part of the martial discourse which encourages bravery and aggression as necessary qualities in cancer treatment, and which attributes survival or death to an assertion or failure of will. Those metaphysical and disempowering qualities obscure the government's inadequate investment in the physical, chemical and mechanical apparatuses that could ensure fewer fatalities.⁴ The martial metaphor demonstrates its own inefficacy as a protest, since it colludes with the very qualities it opposes: as long as citizens are subject to the idea that they can fight a disease through an effort of will, there is no need for a negligent government to increase its investment in healthcare.

Yet articulating the hopelessness of the protest is still a means of increasing awareness of suffering. The metaphor also allows the poet to endow her survival with purpose and value; simply inscribing the fact of death, and that cancer is a matter of the chemical, not the volitional, offers no pattern or hope of recovery. In writing about her cancer, Hacker repeatedly modifies the real into a pattern of recovery by means of commitment to a group.

3 Hacker's declaration echoes the words of Audre Lorde in *The Cancer Journals* (1980): "Well, women with breast cancer are warriors, also. I have been to war, and still am. So has every woman who had had one or both breasts amputated because of the cancer that is becoming the primary physical scourge of our time. For me, my scars are an honorable reminder that I may be a casualty in the cosmic war against radiation, animal fat, air pollution, McDonald's hamburgers and Red Dye No.2, but the fight is still going on, and I am still a part of it" (61).

4 Even Lance Armstrong found it difficult to accept that "Good, strong people get cancer, and they do all the right things to beat it, and they still die. That is the essential truth that you learn. People die" (3).

“Cancer Winter” consists of a number of different approaches to this necessity, tentative assertions and discardings of metaphorical parallels and sense-making. Within this process, Hacker feels the same kind of concern over artifice outlined by Paul Fussell, writing on Rudyard Kipling’s *The Irish Guards in the Great War*; Fussell asked,

how are actual events deformed by the application to them of metaphor, rhetorical comparison, prose rhythm, assonance, alliteration, allusion, and sentence structures and connectives implying clear causality? Is there any way of compromising between the reader’s expectations that written history ought to be interesting and meaningful and the cruel fact that much of what happens — all of what happens? — is inherently without ‘meaning’? (171–72)

Rather than concern over reader expectations, Hacker’s negotiation is between ethics and pragmatism. At times in “Cancer Winter”, as with the warrior figures of “Year’s End”, the two are in opposition; at others, the ethical integrity of each attempt at assimilation and elucidation is a major factor in that attempt’s ability to effect sustaining psychological recovery. Hacker’s sequence repeatedly presents the difficulties involved in seeking ethical ways of figuring cancer. Early on in the sequence, Hacker describes the Paris street where she lives, her family and her lover, her surgery, physical scars and reactions to her body. In the fifth sonnet, she records the stages of her understanding: she rereads elegies written for friends, and mentions her belief at the time that she was “a witness, a survivor”, someone who learned a lot about pain through the love she had for other people. In this subject positioning, Hacker says that she needs to find a new “metaphor” while she “eat[s] up stories” about women who have survived breast cancer: “Cell-shocked, I brace to do / what I can, an unimportant exiled Jew” (81). In the word “cell”, Hacker exposes cancer’s physicality, but the word appears in something metaphysical, so the description conveys the difficulty in figuring the disease. Cancer itself is amorphous, unregulated growth, so its nature suggests it cannot be pinned to one correlative alone. The risk involved in this multiplicity is that the range of things cancer is like — the range of metaphors that can be used to represent it — is rather large. However, because cancer is amorphous, it may be unnecessary to find a metaphor for something that is already metaphorical.

Cancer’s openness is actually restrictive: because it does not need to be like anything

else, the metaphor must be absolutely essential, possessing emotional and ethical acuity; it must also contain an appropriate degree of pain. A poet's misjudgement of the level of suffering within a figure, and thus the gravity of the disease, results in the figure's unsuccessful communication, and its ethical impropriety. Hacker's "cell-shocked" figure suggests that cancer is like shell-shock, namely that produced in the specific conditions of World War One; equally, since figures such as this function bilaterally, it may suggest that shell-shock is like cancer.⁵ If so, this may claim agency (describing suffering in a volitional way), but it is still a mark of subordination. Cancer may be shocking, it may create a state of shock — a physical condition producing psychological symptoms — but not shell-shock, a psychological condition displaying physical symptoms in response to physical danger.⁶ With cancer, there is no psychological breakdown in each cell, just cellular changes. The two inimical things do not work in the same way: they effect different emotional responses, and require different poetic processes. If the pun is allowable, the range of metaphorical precision risks deregulation: cancer and chemotherapy may be aggressive attacks, but their parallels could equally be any other violent force.

The possible difficulty with Hacker's metaphor is not discrepant scale. After all, cancer may kill more per year than all global wars combined.⁷ Rather, the concern is perceptual imprecision, and the vicarious adoption of suffering. This metaphor has the tendency to operate not purely by the perception of similarity, but also by the logic of addition: not only is Hacker's cancer traumatic, it is also as traumatic as suffering in the First World War. Cancer does not need to claim the suffering experienced in this war in order to authenticate its horror; indeed, this may distract from its actual causes and its actual dangers. Any metaphor constitutes a risk, in its ability to convince, whether perceptually or ethically: the detrimental imprecision of "Cell-shocked" must be weighed against the emotional and conceptual impacts the poet needs to convey with this particular choice, namely the physical and metaphysical pain produced by relentless and passive exposure to a hostile force. Modifying this hostile force offers a sense of agency: if the poet can still generate figures, still make the world other than it is, then perhaps this offers a pattern of physical and emotional regeneration, in which ethical precision is an irrele-

5 It seems Hacker has this conflict particularly in mind; the effect would be quite different if she had alluded to "post-traumatic stress disorder" rather than shell-shock.

6 The distinction is between humanly determined physical conditions and those ultimately uncontrollable by humans.

7 The WHO's estimate for cancer deaths between 2005 and 2015 is 84 million.

vance in the necessity to survive.

Hacker's "Cell-shocked" figure is one of *Winter Numbers*' attempts to modify the disease in order to surpass it, and this process is something more vitally pragmatic than the act of exploratory empathy Stephanie Hartman suggests in her article "Reading the Scar in Breast Cancer Poetry":

For Hacker, cancer is a means to imagine her relationship to other sufferers, separated from her by history or geography; her poems about breast cancer create a vivid and complex sense of a composite identity. (162)

Cancer is not the means by which to understand the group, but experience beyond the self is the means by which the individual can come to terms with cancer. In this social process, Hartman states that "History forces itself on her" (163), but this is actually a deliberate act of relating by the poet. Cancer is made external, like all those other hostile forces making up "history", that must be reconciled with. Using metaphorical parallels larger than the self may perform two things at once: it declares an allegiance to others, and it uses their pain as the source of purgation. A confrontation with history, therefore, with other hostile forces, requiring the adoption and intensification of pain, is necessary for the reconciliation, assimilation and purging of guilt involved in recovery.

Aesthetically, if not ethically, such a reconciling externalization is possible because cancer is boundless, or "gratuitous as a massacre" (85). Throughout *Winter Numbers*, Hacker turns to other examples of mass destruction and to patterns of survivors' guilt, figuration and recovery, to gain an understanding of how to process her guilt. In the seventh sonnet, the poet describes her white blood cell count, and the lack of surety she has about her situation. As a Jewish American living in Paris, she tries to comfort herself:

But I'm alive, and can believe I'll stay
alive a while. Insomniac with terror,
I tell myself, it isn't the worst horror.
It's not Auschwitz. It's not the Vel d'Hiv. (83)

Vel d'Hiv refers to the roundup of Jews that took place in the Vélodrome d'Hiver, Paris, in July 1942. In gauging her situation's severity, unlike in sonnet 5, the negation holds that cancer is not as terrible as suffering in the Holocaust, and that for the poet to aggrandize

her individual situation in such a way would be wrong. But as they seek to limit severity, such negative statements can be problematic, since they include the denied element. In this kind of inflective statement — reflected in the possible pun on “HIV” — discrimination may operate with a lack of discrimination.

In “Cancer Winter”, links between disparate atrocities are simultaneously opened and closed off, such as in the ninth sonnet, where Hacker repeats the fact that cancer is not as traumatic as suffering in the Holocaust, or gang rape in Bosnia or El Salvador. She wonders for what reason she has been “Reprieved” from death by cancer; in its “gratuit [y]”, the voraciousness in finding imaginative parallels that it demands, and in the poet’s panicked, disorientated need to locate emotional support, cancer “tempts” the poet to recall her father’s death in his forties, and “each numbered, shaved, emaciated Jew / I might have been” (85). In this image, the biological risks becoming the historical: Hacker may now be “reprieved” from the Holocaust, and the inflective imagery continues, since survivors of the Holocaust “wore the blunt tattoo, / a scar”. Observing that survivors of the Holocaust “wore” a tattoo and lived in exile from the scenes of the massacre, and noting that she lives far away from the scene of her butchering (in France, not the United States), Hacker wonders what she should do with her mark of survival, the scar of her mastectomy. “Should I tattoo my scar? What would it say?” she asks. Stephanie Hartman writes that “Tattooing is a figure for Hacker’s agency; whereas the scar is unchosen, the tattoo offers a way to incorporate the scar into a design of her own making and to control how it is read by others” (165). Part of this agency is the freedom to make imaginative links between disparate experience — between her cancer scar and Holocaust survivors’ tattoos — and even to present the absence of agency as empowerment. There is no aesthetic consonance between a Holocaust tattoo and a cancer scar, and Hacker comes some way to addressing this aesthetic limitation with the admission, “What would it say?” What would its meaning be? What is the precise connection now between Hacker’s scar and Holocaust tattoos, other than a lineage of surviving markedly different traumas?

Hacker also expresses her confusion in assessing the testimonial aspect of her poetry: who is it for? What is it for? In the fifth sonnet, she states that “I thought I was a witness, a survivor ... / I need to find another metaphor” (81), but part of the difficulty in interpretation lies in establishing the meaning of these terms. Both words, “witness” and “survivor”, possess more than strictly physical resonance. In her “Journal Entries”, Hacker wrote about Adrienne Rich’s poem “From Corralitos Under Rolls of Cloud” and the need to question the “speciousness of a division between ‘victims’ and ‘survivors’”, since

cancer sufferers “are both at once” (“Journal Entries” 218). Hacker’s distinction may be that while victimhood is interpreted wholly negatively and passively, survivorship carries a positive force. But the identification of equality is contestable, however, since “victim” suggests a metaphysical sense of injustice, of the unreasonable, and thus imputes will to the irrational, just as in the context of cancer, “survivor” may imply a person who did something special in order to survive, whereas a “victim” made no such effort of will or ingenuity.

However, the particular interest of Hacker’s use of “survivor” in “Cancer Winter” lies in this very imprecision. By writing “I thought I was a witness, a survivor ... / I need to find another metaphor”, the syntax risks a conflation of the two terms, rather than keeping them distinct; what Hacker implies is that in attempting to bear witness to her survival, there is an inevitable progression into the metaphorical, where merely providing documentary testimony is not enough to effect a sense of recovery, and that inscribing the experience inevitably leads to corruptions of the real. This slippage into artifice is clear when Hacker says that the supposedly factual sense of bearing witness or surviving is itself metaphorical. It may be that metaphysical recovery is incompatible with immaculate ethics. This feeling becomes clear when, using her scar as a figure of recovery, she writes in sonnet 11 that she could tattoo the scar with the words “K. J.’s Truck Stop” (87). In recalling how her lover sucked her breasts, Hacker turns away from the confluence with Holocaust survivors’ tattoos she posited earlier. The two images — scar and tattoo — had been run together not to suggest that physically surviving cancer is similar to physically surviving the Holocaust, or that the emotional damage involved in surviving one would be the same as that produced in surviving the other. Hacker borrows from trauma narratives, adapting the ways in which, for example, a Holocaust survivor may bear a tattoo not as a mark of dispossession but possession — of history, allegiance, resistance — for the use of a cancer survivor’s perception of a scar. Hacker’s deliberate tactlessness — the incompatibility of this image with the respectful tones customary in the context of the Holocaust — suggests that any insistence on the impulse to recovery, or to life and love, will be interpreted as a betrayal or an indiscretion.

In this way, the scar / tattoo image is not a claim to vicarious suffering, but a distancing from it, and thus a mark of gratitude. These poems are less about asserting solidarity with those who died in the Holocaust, than about how the Holocaust can offer a pattern for overcoming both trauma and survivors’ guilt. It would be inaccurate to suggest these two dissimilar things are equal in severity or causation; but is the use of the

pattern of recovery itself also questionable? In positing then retracting links between cancer and the Holocaust, do the two parts of the parallel fall away intact after the desired element resulting from the union — the impetus towards recovery or reconciliation — has been attained? In any case, regardless of ethics, should a poet be allowed to determine the conditions of her representations, her own patterns of recovery? If cancer is “gratuitous”, then the poet’s means of overcoming the disease may be gratuitous also, reaching an understanding or emotional revivification by any means possible, if indeed she controls that process at all. Another contemporary poet who documented her experience of breast cancer is Alicia Suskin Ostriker. In her 1996 sequence “The Mastectomy Poems”, on the verge of recovery in “December 31”, she voices the urge to re-imagine her body:

A woman should be able to say
I've become an Amazon,
Warrior woman minus a breast,
The better to shoot arrow
after fierce arrow (208)

As Ostriker implies in her first line, if a connection makes moral and emotional sense for the poet, the reader’s ethics may be of secondary significance. The issue here is expediency, or the importance of self-recovery through metaphysical means.

Ostriker’s poem depicts recovery as opposition, but since the first line here can be conditional rather than declarative, its belligerence is limited. For Hacker, similarly, the physical power of cancer, as well as her ethical commitment, place restrictions on her poetry. For Hacker’s poems to constitute an oppositional force, they cannot cede to consolation; rather than consolation, what they seek is a reduction in the number of women dying from breast cancer. It would be presumptuous for the poet to assert consolation for those who have died, and since cancer is mostly cureless — or cures only provisional — the sequence cannot bring ease. Sonnet 14 is addressed to those who have died from the disease, and in commemorating and protesting against cancer’s high mortality rates, Hacker announces that “These numbers do not sing / your requiems, your elegies, our war / cry” (90). For Hacker, it is impossible to process these facts of early death into the lyrically transcendent, or into something as benign as a pop song. But for all their ethical complexity, are the poems effective as a “war cry” against complacency towards the disease? For Melissa F. Zeiger, Hacker’s closing sonnet has a specifically feminist inten-

tion: Hacker emerges from the experience of cancer still “alive”, which “means not dead, not voiceless, not in the preordained place of Eurydice, not buried in elegy. That in itself constitutes a cultural politics as well as a poetics of breast cancer” (165). Since Hacker is not dead, she is not the silent, disempowered figure — in Zeiger’s argument — of male elegy. Excluded from Zeiger’s dichotomy is that small percentage of males who develop breast cancer, as well as the piece of reasoning that explains why these poems should be understood as being exclusively concerned with women’s experience — rather than all cancer patients, survivors, children and relatives. David Kennedy reads *Winter Numbers* in a similarly restrictive way; he affirms Zeiger’s words, that what “rescues the poet and those she commemorates” from the position of silent victim is not only the fact that Hacker survives, but that this is written “in a poem by a woman about other women” (78). Kennedy suggests that the fact of gender alone can free itself from conditioning, that *anything* a female poet writes will be constitutionally removed from patriarchal thinking. Breast cancer may claim an overwhelming majority of female victims, but if there is institutional negligence, it is not gendered but non-discriminating. The high mortality rates of breast cancer demand poetry that protests against both gender discrimination and economic inequalities, something made brutally plain in Kathy Acker’s 1996 essay “The Gift of Disease”, where she discusses the economics of cancer treatment upon receiving her breast cancer diagnosis:

At that time I was working as an adjunct professor at an art college and so did not qualify for medical benefits. Since I didn’t have medical insurance, I would have to pay for everything out of pocket. Radiation on its own costs \$20,000; a single mastectomy costs approximately \$4,000. Of course, there would be extra expenses. I chose a double mastectomy, for I did not want to have only one breast. The price was \$7,000. I could afford to pay for that. (Acker)

If Hacker’s poems are to protest against insufficiencies in the healthcare system, they must speak on behalf of all those disadvantaged. But however ethically they make a protest, using these poems as a “war cry” falls prey to the same collusive problems of the warrior metaphor in “Year’s End”. There is a kind of desperation in the cry, since the enemy has all the power, and the poet no other metaphysical weapons available to her.

At the end of “Cancer Winter”, Hacker acknowledges her and her poetry’s vulnerability, and that she is ultimately “alone”, dependent on the vicissitudes of her bodily cells, far

from any idea of comfort. Recovery, or survivorship, consists of a struggle with the everyday. In the final sonnet, Hacker pours herself a coffee (despite the fact, she acknowledges, that caffeine is a carcinogen), and she sits down to write: "I almost forget how close to the bone / my chest's right side is. Unremarkable, / I woke up, still alive. Does that mean 'cured'?" (90). Of course Hacker is not fully cured, whether physically or emotionally. Such a painful experience cannot be fully overcome or separated from; if it could be, the disease would lose its force, and concern over its danger would diminish; the mundanity of existence — simply living from day to day — is something that must be continually struggled for. Her poetry can only be provisional, and find a similarly vulnerable figure to be persuasive. In the penultimate sonnet, the poet asks for the "blight that ate my breast like worms in fruit" to be overcome by the "daily pesticide" (89) that she absorbs. She prays to be let live, so that she can celebrate her lover's body and their "wide- / branched perennial love, from whose taproot / syllables shape around the lengthening days." Comparing the human body to a tree — both with their health and disease — claims allegiance with the whole of the natural world, and in this way the growing tree could also be an image of cancer spreading. Similarly, "Cancer Winter"'s fourteen sonnets make up a staggered corona: the last line of each sonnet is picked up by the first line of the sonnet two places on in the sequence, a cyclical structure that points to the bindings of the disease, but also to the accretions of cure, keeping the process of recovery in motion. Equally, the reappearance of earlier material suggests the constant possibility of cancer recurring despite Hacker's six cycles of chemotherapy. Cure and remission could equally be the growth of destruction.

Hacker maintains this equanimity in "August Journal", *Winter Numbers'* final poem, where cancer is unremarkably part of the world, a natural thing. Hacker is not displaced or bound by self-absorption, or looking for a pattern of survival either in the past or the future; she feels that

All I can know is the expanding moment,
 present, infinitesimal, infinite,
 in which the late sun
 enters without comment
 eight different sets of windows opposite. (95)

Saba Bahar argues that this ending is "apparently nihilistic", since "The presence of one's

existence cannot be trapped within a story any more than the present can be framed by events, future and past” (1040). But in the consonance of the vision of growth and the pattern of cancer, recovery and suffering are part of the same principle of provisionality. Such a conclusion cannot be “nihilistic”, since it is essentially the basis of life. But it may be nothing to do with ethics, and it is this possibility that *Winter Numbers* is determined to avoid.

There is a definite necessity for process in *Winter Numbers*, but the aesthetic and ethical limitations in its cancer metaphors demonstrate the narrow parameters within which the cancer poet writes. In struggling to free themselves from physical and psychological devastation, *Winter Numbers* makes use of a number of different strategies——empathetic group relating, martial discourse and the patterns of elegiac recovery——articulating by turns love and fear, guilt and indignation. The failure of these strategies to offer anything like sustaining hope and power is something the poet cannot allow herself to state directly, but it is implied through the variety of approaches used. As such, the central commitments of the sequence, to be both faithful and ethical in representing the disease and fellow sufferers, are incompatible. While cancer still has the power to kill her, and while there is still injustice in the healthcare system and deaths can possibly be prevented——it is impossible for Hacker to reach resolution in her recovery. These facts, and the ethical burdens her poetry carries, constitute only part of the sad and enduring legacy of this disease.

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《SUMMARY》

Marilyn Hacker's Cancer Poems

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Marilyn Hacker's 1994 collection *Winter Numbers* attempts to come to terms with cancer, including the death of friends from the disease, and Hacker's own mastectomy and chemotherapy. Cancer is problematic for poetry, and for elegy in particular, for a number of conceptual, ethical and mimetic reasons. As it seeks to make progress away from the disease through the patterning of rhyme and meter, metaphor, and the assertion of fertility, cancer poetry finds itself replicating the creatively destructive qualities of the disease. The poetry's capabilities are further limited by the need to maintain ethical integrity in its figures, in order not to exploit cancer's metaphorical potential. *Winter Numbers* is rigorous in its concern over poetic process. Its keystone, the "Cancer Winter" sequence of sonnets, attempts to establish a body of ethics, to identify precisely what is permissible and possible in representing cancer and cancer deaths. This essay addresses the ethical and mimetic binds which restrict the representation of recovery; it assesses whether it is possible to document the experience of cancer faithfully and ethically at the same time, as the poems mediate between the physical and metaphysical worlds, and between the poet's self-protective impulse and society; finally, the essay seeks to account for the intensity of the poet's ethical commitment.