

nymous company of long-distance reasoners amid the political tumult of sixties Chicago; an ancient community beset with sociological blur and cultural self-questioning in reemerged Morocco; a carefully defended island of specialistic research in manicured Princeton—that most powerfully directs your intellectual trajectory. You move less between thoughts than between the occasions and predicaments that bring them to mind.

This is not so say that the whole thing is but a chapter of accidents. Such a view of what purports, after all, to be a scientific career devoted to finding out things thought to be so and persuading others that at least they might be, involves distortions of its own not unself-serving. For surely it can't be the case—can it?—that the merest stumbling about, passively noting what strikes one as notable, is sufficient to accomplish so exacting a task. In the course of all this coming and going and knocking about surely there emerge some governing aims continuously worked toward, some practiced skills habitually exercised, some determinate standards repeatedly applied, some settled judgments as to what is knowable and what isn't, what will work and what won't, what matters and what doesn't. Representing what one has been doing as the result of just about everything in the world except one's beliefs and intentions—"it just happened"—is hardly plausible, a way of removing oneself from the picture in the guise of putting oneself into it.

Since the decline, in most quarters, of belief in a single and sovereign scientific method and the associated notion that truth is to be had by radically objectivizing the procedures of inquiry, it has become harder and harder to separate what comes into science from the side of the investigator from what comes into it from the side of the investigated. In anthropology, in any case, and in my case anyway, assuming either has anything to do with science, the indivisible experience of trying to find my feet in all sorts of places and of the places themselves pressing themselves upon me seems to have produced whatever has appeared under my professional signature. Indeed, it has produced that signature itself.

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*Art and AIDS;
or, How Will Culture Cure You?*

LANGDON HAMMER

THIS ESSAY will address the question in my title through a reading of two poems. One is by Adrienne Rich, the other by James Merrill; both are elegies for the literary critic David Kalstone. In each case, Kalstone's death in 1986 from AIDS-related causes provokes a troubled meditation on the relation between culture and AIDS. *Culture* is Rich's word for the high art of Mozart and Keats, and I will use it in that restricted, old-fashioned sense, since it is exactly the high-art forms of the ballet, opera, and lyric that are in question for Rich and Merrill. Culture is seen in their poems as powerless to help people with AIDS, so removed is it from the material realities of disease and death. Yet culture also seems strangely involved in the suffering caused by HIV, as if it were itself infected. The instability of the relation between culture and AIDS in these poems—the feeling that high art is alternately remote from the catastrophe "AIDS" names and deeply implicated in it—structures the unstable, ambivalent relations between these poets and their friend. Those relations include in each case erotic longing and erotophobic dread. At issue for both poets is the connectedness of grief and fear—grief that they have been separated from their friend, and fear that they may be reunited with him.

The pairing of Rich and Merrill, the political poet and the esthete, may seem an unlikely one, but there is a precedent for it in *Five Temperaments*, Kalstone's critical study of Lowell, Bishop, Merrill, Rich, and Ashbery, published in 1977. Although set forth in Kalstone's characteristically modest, nonpolemical prose (or just for this reason), *Five Temperaments* helped to define and secure one of the canonical formations in postmodern American poetry. Kalstone's practice in *Five Temperaments*—his focus on individual poets, the

paragraph, Rich addresses Kalstone in the second-person, asking him how he thinks culture is going to help him in his illness.

And what good will it do you
to go home and put on the Mozart Requiem?
Read Keats? How will culture cure you?

Poor, unhappy

unwell culture what can it sing or say
six weeks from now, to you?

It is possible to hear these questions as mocking ones. Heard in this way, they ironically, aggressively separate Rich from the culture-lover, the male critic who, infected by HIV, returns home to a sheltered space of esthetic reflection and listens to Mozart or reads Keats. In this setting, the contemplation of art is a means of thinking about dying that does not oblige the person with AIDS to take action or to connect his condition with that of less privileged people out on the street—to whose fate, however, his own remains bound. Bitterly, Rich's poem seems to ask of the dead man, What good does your refined temperament do you now? In another sense, though, Rich is asking Kalstone about the limits of her own ability, as a poet, to help him, as if she were saying, What good does *my* refined temperament, my culture, do you now? That guilty question is close to the surface of the poem when Rich shifts her attention to culture itself, which, as if sympathetically, seems as "Poor, unhappy," and "unwell" as the person with AIDS. In its incapacity to cure, culture has come to seem contaminated—elite, decadent, ineffectual.

There is also an implication that, before it can cure, culture itself must be cured; which is to say, culture must be disassociated from death, or more exactly, from a certain morbid construction of desire. Of course, the deathliness of desire and the desirability of death are familiar ideas in Romantic art. In her elegy for Kalstone, Rich is consciously writing against that tradition and its identification of beauty with morbidity. That is the polemical force of the striking and deliberate echo of Keats in Rich's last paragraph. Here

is Keats's famous fragment, "This living hand," followed by the closing lines of Rich's poem:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calmed. See, here it is—
I hold it towards you.

Give me your living hand If I could take the hour
death moved into you undeclared, unnamed
—even if sweet, if I could take that hour
between my forceps tear at it like a monster
wrench it out of your flesh dissolve its shape in quicklime
and make you well again

no, not again

but still. . . .

"This living hand," Keats writes, extending it to the reader in a gesture that promises not so much to save the dying poet as to draw the reader into the text's odd, unliving afterlife. "Give me your living hand," Rich replies, speaking to her friend as if to Keats in an imaginative move that promises to reverse the deathly spell of the Romantic text and place Rich's poem safely, unambiguously on the side of life (where the poem appears, like the elegy by Merrill, in the anthology of AIDS poetry edited by Michael Klein, *Poets for Life*).

When I told a friend, a poet, I was working on Rich's elegy, he said, "I *hate* that poem! It's like Kalstone read Keats, got sick, and died." I don't hate Rich's poem—I admire it, but my friend was right about what it means to read Keats in this case. In the poem's first paragraph, death has "its music," as autumn does in Keats's final ode, and music somehow carries death within it. That opening paragraph makes us feel that reading Keats, or listening to Mozart,

retraces the path death took there, putting her in contact with it. There is also a sense that, when she imagines her removal of death as a form of childbirth, Rich is placing the gay man with AIDS in the position of a woman. That gesture draws Kalstone away from the risks of gay male sexual practice evoked earlier in the poem, and it interprets Rich's relation to him according to the model of nurturant relations between women Rich has elsewhere called "the lesbian continuum." But the gesture works in the opposite direction too by emphasizing the poet's identification with her friend and drawing her closer to his unhealthy condition. That is, if the feminizing of the gay man with AIDS makes him like the poet, and therefore alive and well, it also makes her like him, which means infected and dying.

The danger Rich's identification with Kalstone conveys is reinforced by the ghostly presence of Keats's fragment. Recall the reciprocity Keats evokes: "if it were cold / And in the icy silence of the tomb," the speaker's outstretched hand would "So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights / That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood, / So in my veins red life might stream again." For the reader Keats addresses, the desire to exchange fluids with the dead—"red life"—will be motivated by a disturbed conscience, rather than sympathy. In the age of AIDS, "This living hand" speaks to the sexual guilt of survivors, and it proposes a kind of erotic sacrifice as a means of discharging that guilt (through a vampire fantasy long associated with same-sex desire: you will have to give up your own life, in the form of your blood, to satisfy the dead, the contamination of whose blood has killed them). Rich does not speak of such a terrifying exchange of fluids. Breaking off before completing her final sentence, the one that begins "if I could," Rich stops short of specifying what she would do, or give up, in order to bring her friend back to life. But Keats's proposition haunts Rich's incomplete one, which ends abruptly, but eloquently enough, in silence.

Rich's wish in this poem is to take hold of AIDS and "dissolve its shape in quicklime," but it is AIDS that takes hold of her poem and dissolves it. That is the powerful effect of the final fragmentary lines. Throughout the poem, Rich arranges her free verse with

double-spacing within the line. These caesuras create a small but notable break within each line (suggesting an internal threat perhaps like that of the virus itself). At the end of the poem, Rich's lines break apart. This breaking occurs when Rich constructs the penultimate line by dropping a half-line down from the one above it ("and make you well again // no, not again") and then ends with a two-word phrase and ellipsis: "but still. . . ." These lines push Rich's poem to the edge of inarticulateness: Rich appears unsure of what she has "to sing or say" to her friend now that she has relinquished the fantasy of healing him. Admitting culture's incapacity to "cure" AIDS, to make the person with AIDS "well again," Rich claims for her poem only the power of make-believe—the power to speak to Kalstone as if he were not dead "but still" alive and uninfected. The final ellipsis enacts a falling away, then, that acknowledges that the hand Rich wishes to grasp is no longer living. There is grief in this conclusion. But there is also relief: the moment at which she is separated from her friend, when it becomes impossible to speak to him any longer (to go on pretending), the poet is also released from the threat the dead hand represents. At the end of the poem, Rich, not Kalstone, is restored to life.

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Merrill's elegy for Kalstone is a suggestive complement to Rich's, because it explores the same confusion of categories hers does, but comes to a different conclusion. Rich's effort to place art on the side of life is consistent with the distrust of artifice, virtuosity, and performance she has shown throughout her career. In contrast, Merrill has always been dedicated to exactly these dimensions of esthetic experience. The title of his elegy, "Farewell Performance," declares that stance archly and sadly. But like Rich, Merrill is skeptical about culture's power to console. His poem, inscribed *for DK*, begins with an account of an evening at the ballet. It is perhaps a memory of the New York City Ballet performance of *Mozartiana* that Suzanne Farrell dedicated to Kalstone, her friend and admirer, two days after his death.

The point thereafter was to arrange for one's
Own chills and fever, passions and betrayals,
Chiefly in order to make song of them.

Grand opera, not ballet, is the art form in question here. The soprano's thrillingly "high airs" operate like "lust" to open the poet's own throat to receive a deadly, sexual "dagger-thrust." In this theater of queer desires, where Merrill and Kalstone are both at home, art triumphs over nature, and the body opens itself to overwhelming, transforming passions. The self forged in this theater is a cultivated temperament, what "Farewell Performance" calls the "grayly glimmering sublimate of / palace days, Strauss, Sidney, the lover's plaintive / *Can't we just be friends?*" But the passage through fire "Farewell Performance" concerns is not metaphorical; Merrill is discussing the cremation of his friend's body and the scattering of his ashes. "Matinees" (where the opera audience is a "furnace roaring praise") was written twenty years before "Farewell Performance." Viewed from the perspective of the later poem, the plan to arrange "for one's / Own chills and fever, passions and betrayals," is provocative. Someone might want to ask: Did David Kalstone kill himself? But the real question is: How can Merrill avoid that suggestion—and its homophobic charge—without also renouncing the desire for deathlike raptures?

Leo Bersani and, more recently, Tim Dean have addressed the general implications of that question by using the psychoanalytic concept of the death drive to locate a self-destructive moment in gay desire that is not simply an internalization of the murderous will of the so-called general population. I will not try to summarize their complex arguments, but I want to take from Dean, in particular, Lacan's reformulation of the death drive as the expression of an internal psychic conflict. In Dean's view, "Perhaps the greatest psychic horror of AIDS for a culture that always segregates and shifts death elsewhere is the way AIDS intertwines death with life—and with what is generally assumed to be the life force: the sex drive." This is the horror we see in Rich's elegy for Kalstone. For Dean, that

horror is essential to *jouissance*, the notoriously untranslatable term Lacan uses to define the pleasure beyond the pleasure principle that is at the heart of human sexuality. Among American critics, *jouissance* has often been identified with a certain uncritical celebration of sexuality. Dean wishes to restore to it the negativity the term conveys in Lacan. "In its combination of sex and death," Dean explains, "*jouissance* is like AIDS"; and in this sense, the intertwining of sex and death in AIDS can be seen as a paradigm, not a perversion, of sexual desire. The idea is important because it breaks down the binary division between the living and the dead, and it gives us a theoretical model for "the oxymoronic image of a healthy sick person." With Dean's argument in mind, we can understand the "confusing" image of the person who is at once HIV-infected and asymptomatic as an image of the confusion of life and death that, in Lacan as in Freud, structures psychic life in general. The point is not that there is no difference between those who are infected with HIV and those who are not, but that the special "horror" of AIDS—its linking of sex and death—cannot be confined to the gay man with AIDS.

I think the final stanzas of "Farewell Performance" work toward the same idea. At first, Merrill seems to accept his severance from Kalstone when Peter, his lover, places his "sun-warm," living hand on Merrill's wet one. Peter's gesture recalls the poet to life, drying and warming the hand that released the dead man's remains into the underworld. But it is not easy to let go of the dead, and the question of the poet's relation to his dead friend returns when the dancers return to the stage for a last bow.

Back they come. How you would have loved it. We in
turn have risen. Pity and terror done with,
programs furl'd, lips parted, we jostle forward
eager to hail them,

more, to join the troupe—will a friend enroll us
one fine day? Strange, though. For up close their magic
self-destructs. Pale, dripping, with downcast eyes they've
seen where it led you.

exceptionally rich word in this context. It implies mourning, regret, and shame; it is an English version of the Greek word "catastrophe"; and it reminds us that at this moment the dancers' eyes meet those of the audience below them. The magic of the dance led David Kalstone to the lip of the stage where James Merrill now stands in his place. The scene restages the scattering of Kalstone's ashes, when Merrill's own eyes were downcast, watching as his friend—with "one last jeté"—vanished in the waters below him. Now, the dancers look down on Merrill, who looks up at them. Who is in the underworld and who is not?

Culture cures no one in Merrill's poem. What it does do—what esthetic experience does—is break down the boundary between people on stage and in the audience, between people who suffer and those who observe them. Art, in this specific sense, communicates AIDS. At the end of Merrill's poem, in that final stanza, the dead and living recognize each other—or recognize themselves in each other—with a feeling of complicity I want to call love.

Monotheism and the Violence of Identities

REGINA M. SCHWARTZ

One can declare oneself for difference (as opposed to sameness or homogenization) without at the same time being for the rigidly enforced and policed separation of populations into different groups. — Edward W. Said

At this point it seems impossible to think difference without thinking it aggressively or defensively. But think it we must, because if we don't, it will continue to think us, as it has since Genesis at the very least. — Alice Jardine

MANY OF US imagine that the secular world has freed us from the structures of domination that obtain in religious discourse, but the myth of monotheism continues to foster our central notions of collective identity. Monotheism is a myth that forges identity antithetically—against the Other—and it is a myth that grounds particular identity in universal transcendence. As a cultural formation, monotheism is strikingly tenacious: its tenet—one God establishes one people under God—has been translated from the sphere of the sacred to nationalism, and thence to other collective identities. The political philosopher Carl Schmitt argued that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts," but the sentiment comes not only from one of the framers of fascism. Peter Alter observes that "in nationalism the religious is secularized and the national sanctified," and most historians of nationalism concede that the concentration of power in an omnipotent sovereign was far too useful to divest at the birth of modern nationalism, however secular; allegiance to a sovereign deity in order to forge a singular identity becomes, in our secular world, allegiance to a sovereign nation to forge a national identity. This issues in such ironies as the following rhetoric from one of the