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**Mourning Men: The Elegiac in James Merrill and Richard Howard**

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## Abstract

### Mourning Men: The Elegiac in James Merrill and Richard Howard

Kathleen McKeown

Since the mid-to-late '80s, AIDS has become part of contemporary society. That literary representation of AIDS are now surfacing is thus not unexpected. And, given the homosexual community's early encounter with AIDS, it is equally unsurprising that an extraordinary amount of what is known as AIDS Literature originates in that community. The elegy, a traditional poetic form used to memorialize the dead, is undergoing a resurgence in popularity, especially in the latest collections of gay poets. The contemporary gay elegy is therefore a compelling field on which to examine AIDS themes in gay literature. Canvassing the gay elegies of James Merrill and Richard Howard, this study exposes motifs and themes particular to memorializing a gay AIDS death. The study begins by establishing some parameters of pre-AIDS gay elegiac form by discussing Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982); it then moves on to an examination of the elegies in Merrill's *The Inner Room* (1988), in which images of AIDS figure, and finally it illustrates that the AIDS themes and motifs noted in Merrill are distinctly rendered in Richard Howard's AIDS elegies in *Like Most Revelations* (1995). Their works record both the present cultural moment and a progression of gay elegiac form.

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## Introduction

When there are so many we shall have to mourn,  
when grief has been made so public, and exposed  
to the critique of a whole epoch  
the frailty of our conscience and anguish,

of whom shall we speak?

W.H. Auden, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud"

A highly conventionalized poetic form, the elegy has a long history in English literature, and many of what Harold Bloom would term the “strong poets” have written at least one elegy: Spenser, Milton, Gray, Shelley, Tennyson, Whitman, Arnold and Auden, to name a few, all have elegies among their most popularly anthologized poems. Traditional elegiac form shapes and orders poetic grief to such a degree that, as Northrop Frye contends: “When Milton sat down to write a poem about Edward King, he did not ask himself: ‘What can I find to say about King?’ but ‘How does poetry require that such a subject be treated?’” (97). “Lycidas,” the poem Milton wrote about King in 1638, is, for Bloom, a “parent poem” in the genre of elegy because the poem was so very influential for many – indeed most – later elegies. In 1866 Whitman urbanized and democratized the form in his elegy for Abraham Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” but his poem nonetheless exhibits strong traces of Miltonic elegiac devices; so much so that Richard Chase is compelled to argue for the poem’s divergence from “Lycidas”. Chase’s discussion demonstrates the degree to which “Lycidas” is in fact a “parent poem” to the younger poet’s work. More than simply a poetic field on which to play out what Bloom has dubbed the “anxiety of influence,” however, the elegy is of course a product of its time, place, and the poet’s poetic perspective, exposing its own historic situation. Traditional elegiac form lends itself readily to an examination of the poem’s historic markers, primarily because the conventional “digression” portion of the poem involves a mediation on the contemporary moment. Classically that moment in the digression concerns itself with a contemporary evil: Milton, for example, canvasses the



indecencies of the seventeenth-century clergy, and Whitman decries the casualties of the American civil war.

Like their precursors, contemporary elegists also examine the evils of their society, while they mourn the dead. But their emphasis on historical markers is much more pervasive. The two elegists that form the focus of this thesis, James Merrill and Richard Howard, do not in fact portion out only one section of their elegies for attention to the contemporary moment. Instead their representation of particular social ills suffuses their poems entirely. The subject of AIDS certainly situates Merrill's and Howard's elegies in the late-20th century; however the subject is treated as a main theme rather than a mere digression because AIDS imagery dominates their poems of mourning, and the subject of AIDS is inseparable from images of the deceased. That AIDS is not treated as a separate issue, as digressions are in elegies as late as Auden's, shows a distinct departure from traditional elegiac form. The extensive AIDS imagery noted in Merrill and Howard not only serves to place the poets' work in an historic context, but it equally points to a homoeroticism that situates the poems and poets within a mourning gay community.

At the same time as Merrill and Howard are reinflecting the elegy, critics are turning to a reexamination of the older elegies, arguing for the presence of a certain homoerotic content. Contemporary queer theorists, like Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, have created a lexicon with which to discuss that homoeroticism or homosociality in literary texts past and present. The traditional elegy lends itself well to such discussion, for in it, the love expressed by the male poet for the male deceased figures strongly, and does so

both the hyperbolic language employed to describe the physical and spiritual beauty of the elegy's subject, and in the overall worshipful tone in which the poems are written. The elegy was, in fact, exceptional as an "acceptable" venue for poetic expression of love between men; however that homoeroticism was usually couched in metaphor and ambiguous symbolism. Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, for example, exhibits the cloaked homoeroticism found in many traditional elegies, as does Shelley's "Adonais." And both poems, as I will suggest, have influenced Merrill's and Howard's gay elegies. Now that gender theory and queer theory have become a valid and valued interpretative methodology, discussions of male-male love in elegies and elsewhere have revealed what has been largely ignored. The interpretive switch that Alan Sinfield makes in his analysis of the homoeroticism in *In Memoriam* is demonstrative of changing critical paradigms. In his 1971 interpretation Sinfield dismisses the homoerotic inferences in the Tennyson's poem:

We may be surprised at the physical intensity which these images of the family imply and the shift in gender which one of the friends undergoes, and uneasy at the poet's naïvety. Tennyson and his public were evidently completely unconscious of the sexual inferences which might be drawn from such imagery -- or indeed from the whole poem. It would seem that Tennyson and Hallam conducted their friendship in the same spirit, whatever its psychological basis may have been. Such it was to live in a pre-Freudian age! (*Language* 113-114)

Sinfield's later work on Tennyson in 1986 dedicates an entire section to the problematic of Tennyson's treatment of the masculine and feminine of *In Memoriam*. It seems that in

the fifteen years between the two publications, the evidence of a homosexual relationship between Hallam and Tennyson became academically admissible:

The whole closure which the poem seeks to enact depends upon ‘love’ and the transfigured Arthur and this, as everyone from Tennyson onwards remarks, is reminiscent of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. What is almost never acknowledged is that Dante’s great contribution to western culture was an authoritative translation of the ideal construction of homosexual love, as it was received from the Greeks, into a more amenable heterosexual form, and that *In Memoriam* threatens to reverse this convenient move.

(*Rereading* 127)

Sinfield’s divergent critical assessments are representative of how recently sexuality became an articulated academic issue, worthy of scholarly examination. Homosexual poetry, too, has evolved from the pre-Stonewall inclination to couch all sexual themes in highly obfuscatory metaphors.<sup>1</sup> Homosexual themes surface in Merrill’s early poetry, for example, but they are buried in metaphor. In “David’s Nights in Velih” from *The Fire Screen* (1969) Merrill’s relationship with David Jackson is merely hinted at; in later poems however, the homoeroticism in Merrill’s poetry becomes progressively less shielded by metaphor. And Merrill’s chief work, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982), is widely considered one of the best developed illustrations of gay relationships. This continuing evolution of gay literature, particularly the gay elegy, is the subject of this thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1969 Stonewall riots in New York catapulted the contemporary gay liberation movement.

The first chapter of the study examines Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* as epic-elegy in terms of its exposure of influences of the classic elegiac form. And I suggest that Merrill's use of traditional elegiac motifs is highly revisionary. First and foremost, Merrill inflates the homoerotic undercurrents present in older elegies and produces candidly homoerotic sexual imagery; he creates a mostly gay heaven and envisions the homosexual as a privileged, artistically-superior member of society. In effect, Merrill's adoption and overt homosexualization of the elegy is a sort of homosexual claiming of elegiac form -- a form that more and more gay poets are turning to since AIDS deaths have become so prevalent in the gay community.

In Merrill's mostly gay paradise, the traditional muses are strategically subverted. He humanizes these classic figures to such an extent that they are rendered incapable of fulfilling any muse-like elegiac duty. Merrill reinvents the trope, replacing it with a dead friend, Maria Mitsotaki. He equally alters the traditional doubt to consolation pattern: JM is first frankly skeptical of the Ouija board messages but then displays his awed revelations via the same board. Consolation, the ultimate goal of traditional elegy, is only found in the bizarre world of the Ouija board and never outside of the dictee. In fact, little classic elegiac influence appears in any of the elegies written in JM's poetic persona: instead it seems that only through the elaborate fiction of the Ouija board can Merrill rework traditional tropes. This modification makes the consolation for a death attainable only if one embraces the zany Ouija board experiment and all its convoluted precepts.

Unlike Bloom's ephebe, Merrill does not expose an agonistic relationship with his paternal precursors. Indeed he invites his poetic forefathers to take part in his poem -- WHA, Merrill's Auden figure, has, for example, an extremely influential role in the writing of *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Auden functions as JM's and DJ's guide to the Ouija-board world, and it is he who suggests the metrical scheme for the lengthy poem and the Yes & No format for *Scripts*. As J.D. McClatchy notes: *The Changing Light at Sandover* "dramatizes poetic influence, verging on possession, and yet it does not follow the tragic logic of Bloom's violent battle of souls" (qtd. in Westover 220).

The large role homosexuality plays within Merrill's elegiac Ouija board realm, and outside it as well, clearly places *The Changing Light at Sandover* in the category of gay literature, and still more the precisely, gay elegy. However in writing since the '80s, AIDS has become a prominent feature in many gay poets' works -- especially in their poems of mourning. *The Changing Light at Sandover* therefore becomes an example of a pre-AIDS gay elegy and marks the beginning of an elegiac revision from a homosexual perspective. Merrill continues this process in his late collection, *The Inner Room* (1988), which is the focus of the second chapter of this study. I examine what are specifically AIDS elegies in order to decipher the elegiac tropes associated particularly with a homosexual AIDS death. *The Inner Room* elegies demonstrate new motifs that commemorate an entirely recent kind of death and mourning. Merrill also integrates some classic elegiac allusion in these elegies; however they are made more complex and timely by their enmeshment in AIDS imagery. Although Merrill's AIDS poetry seems, in Joseph Cady's terms, "counterimmersive"--in that it facilitates denial of the horrors of

the AIDS virus -- and often uses metaphor to shield the reader from the ugly facts of dying from an AIDS-related disease, the elegies nonetheless represent the collective grief of the contemporary gay community. The AIDS elegy, at the hands of James Merrill, seems to include some traditional tropes that acquire AIDS implications and also configure a new set of motifs that directly address the current mourning gay community's experience with AIDS.

In order to strengthen the notion that a poetic register of grief for an AIDS death is surfacing in the work of contemporary gay poets, my third chapter discusses the elegies in Richard Howard's *Like Most Revelations* (1995). Howard's aesthetics of loss are centered around AIDS imagery and seem to break from elegiac tradition more firmly than Merrill's AIDS elegies do. Howard's elegies are remarkable in their deliberate rejection or avoidance of elegiac convention and their disregard for socially accepted protocol for the memorializing of a dead friend. What little classic elegiac influence appears in *Like Most Revelations* is subverted. Howard's poetic stance on AIDS deaths and their effects on the gay community is not only bereft of traditional tropes but dark and angry in tone. Such tone, when coupled with the elegy's overt political qualities, seems to poetically render the "turn your grief to anger" slogan Douglas Crimp attributes to AIDS activists. Howard rejects the sentimental gestures of traditional elegy -- even of Merrill's AIDS elegies -- and catalogues his subjects' faults, discussing their weaknesses, pathologizing their sexual preferences, and painting an apocalyptic picture of the homosexual community. Howard's elegiac poetry registers the loss of individuals, yet it also addresses an AIDS-inspired loss to the entire homosexual community: a way of sex.

"Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals Reported to Have AIDS Virus" chronicles the loss of sexual opportunity in the gay community and presents a pointed social commentary on gay issues and AIDS in (North) America today.

The following analysis is informed by its own historic context -- in 1999 AIDS is synonymous with death, is strongly associated with homosexual sex and is a pressing social concern. The subject of AIDS in gay literature exhibits a manifestation of what Yeats held as "the only two topics [that] can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mind -- sex and the dead."

# I

A Gesture toward a New Form:  
James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*

The Breath whose might I have invoked in song  
Descends upon me

Shelley, "Adonais"



James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* is an elegiac poem imbued with classic elegiac allusion. The length and the enormous scope of the work lend themselves to several interpretive possibilities; however, as Peter Sacks suggests, the poem can be read as "an elegy writ very large, as a multiple elegy of epic proportions" (160). And it is its elegiac qualities that I want to address.

The main subjects of Merrill's tome-like poem are elegiac in nature -- he mourns the dead, deals with death, and finds consolation for a death. Merrill's poem incorporates the muses, a wide variety of classic mythological references, an astounding number of transfigurations, a very elaborate vision of the sphere that the dead inhabit, and a remarkably dramatic pageantry. However, Merrill refashions classic elegiac themes and motifs in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, thereby revising traditional tropes. Merrill's revision, and his poetry in general, is filtered through a homosexual perspective and is infused with homoerotic imagery. Because *The Changing Light at Sandover* is a compilation of three previously published volumes of poetry -- "The Book of Ephraim," which was part of *Divine Comedies* (1976), *Mirabell: Books of Number* (1978), and *Scripts for the Pageant* (1980) -- the elegiac text is, in the context of gay writing, essentially pre-AIDS -- in terms of its literary representation. Merrill's interest in traditional elegiac form and his deliberate manipulation of classic tropes in *The Changing Light at Sandover* might therefore be seen as an unwitting prefiguration of the more severe break from convention exhibited in many later AIDS elegies -- including his own subsequent poems. The elegiac adaptations in the trilogy may be examined in order to demonstrate that Merrill's reworked elegiac vision functions, in retrospect, as a type of

early gay elegy, or as a precursor to the less conventional AIDS elegy which seems to lack many traditional tropes.

Conversations with the Ouija board furnish *The Changing Light at Sandover* with the material for its most urgent elegiac message, and the ability to communicate with the Ouija board spirits is attributed to JM's and DJ's homosexuality:

Why did they choose *us*?

Are we more usable than Yeats or Hugo,

Doters on women, who then went ahead

To doctor everything their voices said?

We haven't done that. JM: No indeed.

Erection of theories, dissemination

Of thought -- the intellectual's machismo.

We're more the docile takers-in of seed.

No matter what tall tale our friends emit,

Lately -- you've noticed -- we just swallow it.

DJ: Which we wouldn't do if one of Them...(154)

Because DJ and JM are "docile takers-in of seed," they can receive messages from the Ouija-board world. The two communicants would not be able to "swallow" the words of their interlocutors if they were heterosexual, or if they were "one of Them". An outrageously literalized trope, their homosexuality predisposes them to appreciate, comprehend, and give credence to the entire Ouija-board enterprise.

Unlike the often metaphoric, always implicit, homoeroticism encoded in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, the palpable homoeroticism found in the passage quoted above is overtly sexual. Merrill draws a patent analogy between homosexual sex and talks with the Ouija board. His use of sexual imagery and such diction as, "[e]rection", "dissemination", "takers-in of seed" and "swallow[ing]" semen (in this male context) is explicitly homosexual and diverges from any type of homoeroticism found in traditional elegies. The elegy, a poetic form that traditionally speaks of love between two men, is completely homosexualized in Merrill's elegiac vision. The homosexualizing of the elegy might thus be described in Bloomian terms as an example of a Tessera-type influence -- Merrill takes the homoerotic implications usually present in an elegy, or the parent poems, and further develops the motif in his poem.

A type of homoeroticism is also witnessed in Merrill's depiction of community. In the classic elegy, the community is generally a group of shepherds/poets who mourn the deceased. In Milton's "Lycidas", for example, an image of community is portrayed by way of the shepherd's community: both the mourner and Lycidas are "nursed upon the selfsame hill" (23). In *The Changing Light at Sandover*, however, Merrill's community not only takes a more active role in the action of the poem, but is made up primarily of dead artists (with the exception of JM and DJ) -- most of whom are/were gay. As Edmund White judiciously, and drolly, observes: "The society assembled in James Merrill's trilogy is like that found in the better opera lobby -- primarily gay and male but with a smattering of strong-willed, fascinating older women" (47). Through the Ouija

board, Merrill adroitly develops a sort of gay dominated utopia in which the homosexual is depicted as a celebrated and privileged member:

LOVE OF ONE MAN FOR ANOTHER OR LOVE BETWEEN WOMEN  
IS A NEW DEVELOPMENT OF THE PAST 4000 YEARS  
ENCOURAGING SUCH MIND VALUES AS PRODUCE THE BLOSSOMS  
OF POETRY & MUSIC, THOSE 2 PRINCIPAL LIGHTS OF  
GOD BIOLOGY. LESSER ARTS NEEDED NO EXEGETES:  
ARCHITECTURE SCULPTURE THE MOSAICS & PAINTINGS THAT  
FLOWERD IN GREECE & PERSIA CELEBRATED THE BODY.  
POETRY MUSIC SONG INDWELL & CELEBRATE THE MIND... (156)

As homosexuals, JM and DJ are privileged artists, exhibiting a higher consciousness and an aptitude for high art. The figures in the Ouija-board sphere function as interpreters, unavailable to those in the "LESSER ARTS." Poetry and music, which "CELEBRATE THE MIND," are placed above arts that "CELEBRATED THE BODY." Homosexual "MIND VALUES" are key not only to meeting with the spirits but also to producing fine art. Thus the elegiac community seen in *The Changing Light at Sandover* is unlike both the Miltonic pastoral version and Tennysonian community of mourning poets in its overt homosexual quality. Merrill's reinterpretation of the classic elegiac trope of community suggests -- in burlesque terms -- a society in which homosexuals are not only recognized but considered superior to "SO-CALLED NORMAL LOVERS [who] MUST PRODUCE AT LAST BODIES [because] THEY DO NOT EXIST FOR ANY OTHER PURPOSE" (156). Merrill's elegiac community seems to function as both a reworking of the

conventional elegiac society, and a challenge to traditional assumptions about homosexuality and heterosexuality.

*The Changing Light at Sandover* also challenges and reworks the first impulse of a traditional elegy – the invocation of the muses. The muses, or a muse, is a necessary component to the classic elegy, and Merrill's detailed revision of the conventional figures demonstrates the poet's dissension from traditional interpretation of the classic trope. Merrill's nine muses are introduced with grand ceremony and theatrical magnificence in *Scripts for the Pageant*: & "The Middle Lessons: 4 'Madcap Muses'". The muses in *The Changing Light at Sandover* do not, however, function in the conventional elegiac manner. They are not presented as inspirational goddesses or "gentle" over-seers of the dead, and they do not provide solace to the poets. Rather, they are depicted as slightly devious adolescent pranksters who confuse and torment humankind with their almost malicious meddling: "O IT'S A NASTY AND BRILLIANT FAMILY" (405). Although the muses credit themselves with inspiring poets, they "MAKE THE POEM'S BED/ WITH DIRTY SHEETS" (401). Clio, the muse of history, claims her "DAILY WORK IS A CHAIN [SHE] WEAVE[S] OF EVENTS/ ENSLAVING MAN BY A DECEPTIVE SENSE/ OF HISTORY" (400). Mnemosyne, the muses' mother, places history in man's dreams, "FRIGHTENING/ HIS LIFELONG SLEEP" (401), and Euterpe, the muse of lyric poetry, suggests music that "SHRIEK[S] & CLATTER[S]" (403) in order to lighten the otherwise somber mood of her sisters. Urania, the muse of astronomy, calls herself "ICY RATIONALITY" (403), Terpsichore, the muse of dance, describes herself as

“FORMALIZED DISTRACTION, STEP/ DAUGHTER OF CHAOS,” and Erote, the muse of love poetry, quotes God B as ordering lovers to “PROPAGATE OR DIE” (404).

The picture that Merrill paints of the muses is therefore a distorted one, incongruous with the traditional vision seen in conventional elegies. Merrill’s muses are rendered with gross inflation, and yet seem far more human than the traditional elegiac muse. To further the impression that Merrill’s muses are unlike the standard representation, Michael, one of the muses’ four fathers (Gabriel, Emmanuel and Raphael being the other three), treats the muses as naughty mischievous children. Michael sternly instructs them: “NO MEETINGS WITH DARK DESTINY, HOWLING SINGING & DANCING/ HALF THE NIGHT, LYING TO YOUR FATHERS IN THE/ MORNING, CLAIMING YOU CAN’T REMEMBER!” (404). They are riotous children, who are prone to misbehavior and associated with “dark destiny”, “howling” and “lying”. That they allege they do not remember their activities of the night before is farcical – they are the muses after all, the daughters of memory.

Customarily, Mnemosyne (Memory) is supposed to be the mother of the nine muses, and Zeus is supposed to be their father. In Merrill’s schema, however, Mnemosyne is one of the nine muses, and they have four fathers, none of whom is Zeus. Another alteration to the traditional myth is the appropriation of Calypso, the sea nymph who delayed Odysseus on her island, as a muse. Because Calliope is absent from the elaborate procession of muses, we infer that Calypso, an epic character, is meant to represent Calliope, the muse of epic poetry. Eurydike is Calypso’s twin sister in Merrill’s version of the nine muses, and her only line is: “& MY TEARS” (404). Although

traditionally the young wife of Orpheus whose early death motivates her husband's unsuccessful voyage to the underworld, Eurydike, a tragic figure, is, in this context, the muse of tragedy. However if we follow this logic, then Calypso might also double as the muse of comedy because her "LAUGHTER" is used along with her sister's tears. Thalia, the traditional muse of comedy might be seen as being a sort of muse of the theater. Calypso tells us of she and Eurydike: "TWIN/ STARS ARE WE, OF THALIA'S THEATRES"(404). The misnaming or renaming and the somewhat unclear attributes of Merrill's muses contribute to JM and DJ's bafflement. They seem perplexed by the alterations in the muses' characterization, and they comment: "The Muses too, / Have changed since classical times" (405). The two communicants are told that the muses indeed change "RELENTLESSLY/ RESTYLING FUNCTIONS & NAMES LIKE A COIFFURE!" (405). The muses are therefore evoked only to be dismissed as fickle, shallow, and trivial.

Merrill makes mention of muses elsewhere in *The Changing Light*, but they occupy all of "Lesson 4: Madcap Muses". Because the sequence is presented as a lesson, we question what JM and DJ actually learn from the ceremonious presentation. Rather than being enlightened by the experience, the interlocutors are left slightly alarmed after "meeting" the muses and, in fact, are relieved when the lesson is over. One is left wondering what all the pomp and circumstance accomplishes in the work. The muses are not called on to inspire the poets or to watch over JM's and DJ's dead friends, as is often the case in formal elegies, nor do they contribute any sense of solace or consolation to the

two communicants. The skewed conception of the mythological muses and the lack of their traditional elegiac function are addressed:

SHD URANIA  
NOT BE A TV AERIAL? IT CONFUSES  
US TOO MY DEARS MANY A PUZZLED LOOK  
EXCHANGE IN MID DICTEE. THOSE CLOUDS OF MYTH,  
HOW SHAPELY & DISTINCT THEY USED TO SEEM  
VIEWED FROM BELOW! UP HERE THE VIEW AT CLOUD  
LEVEL IS ALL WHIRLING FROTH AND STEAM.  
GK THINKS (KNOWS) THE MUSES ARE KINETICS  
OF MIND PERCEPTION SUCH SIDESPLITTING DEAD  
ACCURATE SYMBOLS OF THE PROCESS. (416)

Merrill's version of the mythological muses figures them as hazy ornamental symbols, incapable of accomplishing their traditional purpose. In *The Changing Light*, the conventional muses are "GIRLS [WHO] 'CAME OUT'/ TOO YOUNG UNCHAPERONED MOCKING" (416). The muses cannot provide JM or DJ with what they need -- the muses offer neither creative inspiration nor comfort in a time of loss; they are, in the world of the Ouija, simply nothing like their classical representations. Merrill, I would suggest, hauls them out with so much pageantry -- indicated by the stage directions: "*Tableau. They strike a nine-fold attitude, Provocatively, innocently crude*"(404) -- and dedicates an entire section to them in order to demonstrate their ineptitude and superficiality, their inappropriateness for his epic elegy. The classic muses



seem to be empty motifs for Merrill, and so he subverts their image and demonstrates how blurred their poetic significance has become -- so blurred in fact that clear lines no longer exist; Mnemosyne can be either mother or sister, and Calliope can be called Calypso. The muses' vacuousness patently disallows them to play the 'muse role' in *The Changing Light at Sandover*.

Instead the communicants find their muse in Maria Mitsotaki, a person they once knew, admired, trusted, and loved. MM is not exactly as she always seems; in fact no other character shifts as dramatically as she does. However, she is to them a more solid figure -- a figure more tangible than the disorienting, deceptive, and outdated muses. It is MM who lends her voice to the dying Mary Jackson, allowing her to utter her final "bye bye" to her son, DJ. It is not the mythological muses who oversee the dead's safe arrival in heaven, but MM and, in Mary's case, Marius Bewley, who help her "through customs" (100). The usual muses are not called upon to guide DJ's dead parents to heaven; instead they entrust MM with the role and "to her fearless charity commend/ DJ's old parents" (102). The Jacksons indeed are even buried a "crow's black glide from our adored Maria" (99), strengthening the suggestion that they are in her care.

Maria's role as muse is pointed to again later in *Scripts for the Pageant: & "Two Deaths,"* which describes how George Cotzias dies, and is reached through the Ouija board. George tells the communicants that he and Maria "SHARED/ AS MOTTO POSO AKOMA,"<sup>2</sup> and that she gave him "words of welcome" (374), supporting the assumption that she is Merrill's elegiac muse. And she is associated with the second

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase can be translated as either "how much longer" or "how much more".

death treated in the section: that of Robert Morse. WHA tells JM and DJ that Robert and Maria have become very friendly in heaven and that there is:

MUCH GIGGLING FROM THE CHINTZ SETTEE  
HE'S NOT HIMSELF YET PAIN & BOREDOM BLUR  
MOST OF US AT FIRST LEAVE HIM TO HER:  
B4 THE FULL MOON SWEEPS US OFF TO 5  
RM WILL COME ALIVE! (376-377)

MM therefore plays the role that is commonly allotted to the muses in an elegy. Maria can be seen as the Miltonic "gentle Muse" who "with lucky words favour [the] destin'd Urn" (Milton).

Within the text itself, Wystan refers to MM as "RATHER A MUSE" (205), whose first love, in her earthly life, was music. In this context, Maria is implicitly associated with the creative or inspirational quality of the muses. It is Maria, the leader in a conversation between herself and three writers, who seems to control what the writers are allowed to know, and when they are allowed to know it -- she inspires and provides the material for the scribes. More conclusively, toward the end of the poem, MM herself reveals to JM and DJ that she is indeed all nine muses, and Merrill writes: "*The hitherto elusive family Likeness is pronounced*" (480). By designating Maria, a friend he once knew, as all of the nine muses, Merrill balloons the traditional trope of one "gentle" classic figure and further humanizes his vision of the elegiac muse.

Because Maria acts as a guide for their dead friends and family members, she provides JM and DJ with a quotient of elegiac comfort. However the muse contributes

only in part to the overall consolation integral to the traditional form, and Merrill too writes of a greater consolation attained by other elegiac devices. Consolation, customarily the last impulse and the ultimate goal of the traditional elegy, is rendered in a rather unconventional manner in *The Changing Light at Sandover*. The text resonates with an over-all sense of solace that attempts to balance loss with gain, written in classic elegiac distich:

A sense comes late in life of too much death,  
Of standing wordless, with head bowed beneath

The buffeting of losses which we see  
At once, no matter how reluctantly,

As gains. Gains to the work. Ill-gotten gains...  
Under the skull-and crossbones, rigging strains

Our craft to harbor. and salt lashings plow  
The carved smile of a mermaid on the prow. (376)

These lines demonstrate that the poem, or “craft,” although fueled by death and plagued with “salt lashings” or tears, cannot erase the “carved smile.” It is the craft itself that embodies the smile -- the craft that fights against sorrow to find its way to a port all the while with its smile intact. The implication seems clear: that Merrill understands the poem as a vehicle that allows him to reach a safe haven in a crisis. The notion that the

elegy functions as a type of consolation is found elsewhere in the poem, but Merrill seems conscious of the contrived quality that consolation often takes in traditional elegies:

DJ: ...Loss *is* loss. JM: Though  
Hasn't the Board helped us at all to see  
Losses recouped?...  
Those ghastly graveyard facts become a dance  
Of slow acceptance; our own otherwise  
Dumb grief is given words. DJ: Or lies? (335)

Merrill seems all too aware that, although the elegy might be a step toward acceptance, it is nevertheless a form of poetry that traditionally relies on some sort of transfiguration that brings the dead back to life, or a form that “lies” to achieve its consolatory effect. As Sacks points out: “an elegy seeks to create a believable fiction that returns the dead to us in some transfigured version of themselves, be it a flower, a star, a reborn infant, or a genius of the shore” (160).

*The Changing Light at Sandover* is remarkable in its constant transfiguring of the dead through a poetic “MACHINE WHICH MAKES THE DEAD AVAILABLE TO LIFE” (260). Merrill’s figurations are not void of myth, and of course the entire premise of the work is an elaborate fiction that allows JM and DJ access to the dead. By incorporating transfigurations and classic references, Merrill follows his predecessors’ traditional path. However he goes further in his transfiguration process than any earlier elegist, and, rather than contenting himself with an abstract, essentially symbolic

transfiguration (a flower, a star) of his dead colleagues and friends, as well as the spirits he encounters, he gives the dead characters speaking parts through the Ouija board and gives them a physical presence through the mirror. The characters on the other side of the Ouija board go through a series of complex transfigurations that seem somehow more real than traditional transfigurations, if for no other reason than JM's and DJ's sincere bafflement, and the promise that they will eventually understand the processes. The solace, I believe, factors in with the certitude that there *is* a reason behind every death, and that JM and DJ will learn of it through their lessons. Rather than satisfying himself with the traditional resignation that 'God wills it so,' Merrill sets up a huge stage where the big picture comes into focus and each death contributes to it in some concrete way. In Merrill's view of the cosmos people die in order to be reborn and to serve a particular purpose in their new life. The purpose, or we might call it, the assignment, is clearly outlined for the communicants, helping to ease their sorrow at the loss of a friend. The death of Robert Morse, for example, is made tolerable for JM and DJ because of a combination of elements: first because they can "reach" him through the Ouija board, then because they are able to follow his training for his new role, and finally because they are kept abreast of the objective of Robert's new existence. This is all somewhat far-fetched, and indeed an elaborate "lie", but as a fiction that "MAKES THE DEAD AVAILABLE TO LIFE" it is persuasive enough to make consolation attainable.

Merrill treats the death of Robert Morse in two separate literary styles, both of which are undermined because Merrill insists that the elegiacs are merely fictitious performances and provide no concrete solace. He unites Robert Morse with the rest of

the cast on the other side of the Ouija board and also writes an elegy commemorating his dead friend. Upon learning of his death JM comments:

Well, Robert, we'll make room. Your elegy

Can go in *Mirabell*, Book 8, to be

Written during the hot weeks ahead;

Its only fiction, that you're not dead. (376)

Despite the self-aware remark -- "Its only fiction that you're not dead" -- Merrill has Robert arrive in heaven in a dazed and confused state, meeting with Maria only three verses later in the text. JM and DJ are reassured that Robert, in trusting himself to Maria "WILL COME ALIVE!" (377). The communicants reach Robert for the first time two days later when he tells them that he is "MAD ABOUT [their] CHUMS" (377). In this fiction Robert has gone to a tangible place where he is "moving, these days, like a native / In circles of the brilliant and creative" (383). It is established that Robert is a "betweenner" who will eventually be reborn as a composer. He is prepared for this new life in the R/Lab where the process of preparation, which reads like a recipe, is clearly outlined:

THE NEXT RM:

STRAVINSKY POWDER A HALF CUP    A TEASPOON

OF MOZART    DOLLOP OF VERDI    THESE AS U KNOW,

ASPECTS OF HOMER. (497)

Robert's mission is also delineated for his living friends, -- a delineation that contributes to their sense of consolation. JM and DJ are not left lamenting over their lost

friend and wondering why he had to die, nor do they surrender to the typical bewilderment about their own purpose. They are given answers to all the usual melancholic queries that a death provokes. As a transfigured musician, Robert will eventually write "THE SWEET REVELLE / FOR ALL THOSE STILL LEFT TO WAKE" (531). Once determined a musician, Robert is associated with elegy itself through consistent flute imagery. His prospective task also seems elegiac in nature -- he will celebrate "THOSE STILL LEFT TO WAKE" or console the living after MM and WHA have completed their project of reducing the earth's population. JM and DJ can therefore be consoled by the fact that Robert Morse's death will ultimately lead to a larger, more profound consolation. Although the tone is farcical, their friend's death does have a purpose, and they are made to understand that their immediate loss will be the future's gain.

In Merrill's elegy for Robert, he avoids most of the traditional elegiac motifs. Perhaps we do not see the conventional motifs because Merrill attributes them to RM in his "betweenner" stage (the consoling flutist), preferring to concentrate on his friend's life, rather than on his own sorrow. His musical aspirations are alluded to, but Merrill does not describe his talent with the customary veneration of traditional elegies:

He, if no more the youthful fifty-one

Of that first season, 's no less the complete

Amateur. Fugue by fugue Bach's honeycomb

Drips from his wrists -- then, whoops! the Dolly Suite. (255)

This aspect of Robert Morse's personality sheds light on Merrill's later development of RM's character on the other side of the Ouija board, where RM will have something he obviously desired in this life -- a real musical aptitude, rather than a hobbyist's capability. Rather than taking the elegy as an opportunity to exaggerate his subject's talents, as many traditional elegists seem to do, Merrill instead accords Morse talent after death. Robert Morse's elegy therefore seems a more grounded reflection on a deceased friend, a reflection that will be later countered by the fanciful fiction of Merrill's heaven. During the course of *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Merrill does adhere to certain elegiac conventions, elevating his friend to a higher level -- both to a higher genius and a higher purpose. But he also seems conscious of the hyperbolic quality of the elegy:

Wystan saw one late

Tour de force by Robert, and asked to

Include it in *A Certain World* -- q.v.,

Under Spoonerisms. Much of this is true. (255)

These lines reinforce the notion that Merrill, in his elegy at least, seeks to capture the man, Robert Morse, as he was in life and to deliberately avoid hyperbolic renditions by stating that "Much of this is true." W. H. Auden, a formidable presence throughout the text, is referred to in the elegy by his historical first name, "Wystan", rather than by his Ouija-board designation, WHA. Cast as the epic-like guide, Auden steers JM and DJ on their Ouija-board quest for knowledge; however in the real world elegy, Auden is



sketched in images truer to life -- he is an admired, influential fellow poet. Morse's death is also treated as a truism that cannot, or will not, be overly fictionalized:

True also, faced with a complacency  
Laid light as silver leaf on a nightmare,  
Is that his life is over. (255)

In the elegy, Robert Morse is always a man whose personality is never superseded by mythological figuration.

Morse is the only friend who appreciates Merrill's work-in-progress and reads the "dictee" from Ephraim and Mirabell. He expresses some reservations about Merrill's scientific explications: "'Molecular structures' -- cup and hand -- obey / 'Electric waves'? Don't *dream* of saying so!" (256). Although an elegy, a poem that customarily praises the dead, Merrill's text does not shy away from an ironic response to the criticism about the contrivance of the form: "-- So says this dinosaur whom Chem1A / Thrilled, sort of" (256). This theme of ironic deflation is carried over into the next section of the work where Maria too treats Morse's earthly skepticism with a sarcastic comment: "MY DEARS JUST FANCY HAVING TO BE TOLD / AT THIS LATE DATE ABOUT THE MOLECULES! / WHATEVER DID THEY TEACH U IN YR SCHOOLS?" (257). Merrill therefore refuses to gloss over Morse's ignorance in life, yet rectifies the fault in the complex fiction on the other side of the Ouija board. The elegy is therefore a very genuine portrait of the living Morse that includes his faults, whereas the characterization of RM in heaven is one that allows RM to be refined, bettered, and commemorated.

The final lines of the elegy do manifest a certain traditional elegiac cast: "He's gone. Our good friend. As it strikes me, my / Head is in hands. I'm seeing stars" (256). A star, as Sacks points out, often represents a classic elegiac transfiguration of the dead. However Merrill's use of the motif is not traditional. The stars that Merrill sees do not seem to represent a transfigured Robert, and are therefore incapable of any consolatory effect. Merrill's stars, in fact, seem more of the dazed and confused variety, suggesting the product of a severe blow to the head. Again we note that Merrill writes his elegy in grounded terms, rooting it in the physical rather than metaphysical realm, omitting many of the conventional attributes of an elegy from his poem for Robert Morse. The elegy itself therefore provides little consolation; rather it concentrates its powers on a truer, unaffected response to the death of a friend. The vision of the deceased, walking into a room, saying all the things he was once likely to say, and even enjoying a drink – "(A weak one, if you please. Most kind. Yum-yum"[256]) – seems to preclude any lofty metaphors or motifs. The elegy depicts the reality of the man and his death, but Merrill equally casts the Ouija board as a drama that imbues RM with metaphor, myth, transfiguration and most significantly for our purpose, that provides consolation for JM and DJ. The quality of the consolation Merrill depicts is, to a certain degree, compromised because the Ouija board is used as a parody of necromancy; however consolation is nonetheless achieved in the text.

The two disparate spectrums, the real world and the Ouija-board world, do not nullify one another: they demonstrate Merrill's sense that the elegy proper represents all that Robert Morse was in life, while the Ouija-board performance portrays the glorified,

the transfigured, the wiser “betweenner” he has become in death. The Ouija-board sphere offers Merrill an escape from the reality of death he portrays in the elegy. The elegy revolves around the factual – the loss and the mourning aspects of death – whereas the Ouija board offers the fantasy that provides solace. In *Mirabell*, Merrill asserts this sentiment clearly in reference to David Jackson’s ailing mother: “Those last days before Mary died, we made / Contact with Ephraim. As things were, / Where else to look for sense, comfort and wit?” (100). It seems that, for Merrill, classic elegiac ambitions are attainable only in the unreal world of the Ouija board. Merrill’s elegiac tropes are hinged to the Ouija-board sphere -- it is only in this world that consolation is attained, that muses appear, that community is represented, that transfigurations occur, and all with great pageantry. Yet obviously influenced by classic elegiac form, Merrill reinvents classic conventions through his Ouija-board mythos.

The very elaborate alternate universe *The Changing Light at Sandover* illustrates is saturated with homosexual content. Merrill conveys varied aspects of homosexual life by incorporating openly gay characters, addressing gay issues like childlessness, difference, and gay artistry, while peppering “camp wit” throughout the text. As Edmund White notes: “the social and linguistic resources of contemporary gay experience have been drawn on ... freely and naturally in this great work” (52). Even though the traditional elegy is often considered homoerotic the homoeroticism in *The Changing Light at Sandover* has its constellation around the markedly homosexual. Given its publication several years before there was any awareness of AIDS, Merrill’s *The Changing Light at Sandover*, with its homoeroticism and preoccupation with death,

seems like a poetic foreshadowing of the recent “very specific association of gay male sexuality with tragic early death [due to AIDS]” to which Sedgwick refers (EC 144). Instead Merrill envisions a utopian community in which gayness is associated with greatness. In *The Changing Light at Sandover* Merrill’s subversion and reworking of the elegy seems like a precursor to the further revised, but equally gay, AIDS-inspired elegiac vision he develops six years later in *The Inner Room*.

Emergence of a New Form: James Merrill's *The Inner Room*

Does the will-  
 To-structural-elaboration still  
 Flute up, from shifting dregs of would-be rock,  
 Glints of future colonnade and frieze?  
 Merrill, "Losing the Marbles"

“Little Fallacy,” the first poem in James Merrill’s *The Inner Room*, serves as an introduction to the collection. The two-stanza-poem connects sex with death and sets an elegiac cast to the entire collection. As he does in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Merrill writes elegiac poetry in *The Inner Room*. However in the later text, he treats the theme of death very differently. Published in 1988, *The Inner Room* reflects a historical context not present in *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Made clear at the onset of the collection, a defining theme of *The Inner Room* – that sex is connected to death – is undeniably relevant to the late ’80s, when AIDS had become a household term. *The Changing Light at Sandover* was first published almost a decade before the slogan “Silence = Death” was adopted by AIDS activists; and in that text, Merrill is indeed silent on the subject of AIDS, even though death and its aftermath are thematized prominently in the epic elegy. In *The Inner Room*, Merrill moves further away from the conventional elegy and into a new form of the elegiac, reworking the elegy from its already modified form in *The Changing Light at Sandover*. If *The Changing Light at Sandover* offers an example of the resurgence of the elegy in contemporary gay poets’ work, then *The Inner Room* serves as an example of the emergence of an even more revised form. The latter collection incorporates vestiges of classic elegiac conventions, yet it also demonstrates several “new” elegiac tendencies -- tendencies that reflect the effects that the AIDS pandemic has had on the homosexual community. Merrill’s emergent elegiac themes and approaches are, I want to argue, poetic witnesses to the devastating affects that AIDS had brought about in the gay community from the mid-to-late ’80s.

AIDS issues are incorporated into the text through the theme that links the poems in the “Prose of Departure” section of *The Inner Room* – the recurring image of Paul, a PWA, and his pending death. The section, set mostly in Japan, is written in prose that is interspersed with haiku poems, and it relates the narrator’s travelogue with thoughts of his dying friend. Although Paul is dying of AIDS-related illnesses, Merrill’s poetic persona, JM, and his partner DJ, decide not to cancel their planned voyage to Japan. The entire section is elegiac in tone, as JM’s thoughts constantly return to Paul, whose death actually occurs while JM and DJ are abroad, ostensibly avoiding its acknowledgment.

A reading of the poems of “Prose of Departure” as a sort of fractured elegy demonstrates that Merrill’s diverse treatments of Paul’s AIDS-infected status in fact echo the classic elegiac progression from doubt to consolation and therefore nod to the traditional elegy as model. However, “Prose of Departure” is imbued with themes and tropes that relate specifically to AIDS deaths, and traditional elegiac themes become distorted when viewed through the lens of AIDS, often taking on historically specific connotations.

The first poem in “Prose of Departure,” “Imagining it,” introduces the theme of AIDS in prose:

Paul phones to say goodbye. He’s back in New York two days early, but  
we are tied to our trip -- departure this evening -- and he, for his part,  
doesn’t ask us over. (Can a single week have changed him? Surely not.)  
Our dear one sounded strong, unconcerned, above all glad to have left  
the Clinic. (53)

Paul, the elegiac subject, is alive but ill at the onset of the elegy, a circumstance never figured in traditional elegies. Given the nature of a death due to AIDS, it is perhaps not surprising that the mourning process begins before the death occurs. The dealing with the knowledge of a forthcoming death becomes a theme in Merrill's elegy. In "Imagining it," Merrill approaches the theme of foreordained death with images of evasion, escape, and denial. He opens the poem by explaining why JM and DJ do not stay in New York to see their ailing friend: they are "tied to [their] trip." JM and DJ are physically distancing themselves from the PWA, but Paul, "for his part," seems willing to withdraw from the scene as well. We are told that Paul "sounded ... unconcerned" and that a week could "surely not" have brought him any closer to death. The poem suggests that neither Paul nor JM and DJ wants to confront Paul's immanent death.

JM's cruise-ship analogy of Paul's stay at the clinic that ends "Imagining it," depicts Paul, "[w]aiting to hear over his own system the stern voice calling *Visitors ashore*." Paul seems disbelieving of his condition -- he does not feel like a "bona-fide" passenger on the ship that takes elderly couples "upon their final honeymoon." Part of the disbelief featured in "Imagining it" seems attributed to Paul's youth. The clinic, we are told, caters "chiefly to elderly couples from the Plains." And Paul has "embarked too soon" on his final journey.

The lament over an early death is not new to elegiac form; in fact, it is quite common to mourn the work the elegiac subject does not live to write, and to praise the character he would have become if, indeed, he had lived longer. Merrill manipulates this classic elegiac motif in "Strategies," where he describes Paul "as he was only last



winter”: “[h]is book was practically done, he’d quit biting his nails” (57). The image of Paul’s unfinished book suggests that he has yet to accomplish all his goals, and the fact that he had “quit biting his nails” implies that he had overcome a fault, or nervousness, that he had experienced a positive and promising aspect of his character. However, Paul is not yet deceased, and the theme of prior knowledge of death surfaces again in “Strategies” as Merrill portrays Paul’s imminent death immediately after painting his life as unfinished: “Well, now he knows, as do we; and the date line, like a great plateglass revolving door, or the next six-foot wave in an epic poem, comes flashing up to face the music”(57). Paul, JM, and DJ all have to “face” the fact that Paul will die. The inevitability of Paul’s encroaching death is reinforced by a “date line” – a predetermined, fixed due date that all three men anticipate with dread. Merrill writes of the knowledge the men share as a static moment – the moment when a “a six-foot wave” hangs in mid-air before it comes crashing down. The image is a powerful reminder that Paul, and those around him, are always, at some level, apprehensive about the passage of time, because clearly Paul’s time is limited. The foreboding imparted through these lines seems to denote a change in the poetic perception of the subject. In “Imagining it” Merrill employs tropes of evasion, escape, and disbelief about the issue of Paul’s impending death; in “Strategies” Merrill moves to a state of anxious expectancy, and Paul’s looming death is rendered as inescapable.

The theme of foreknowledge of death is addressed in “Afternoons at the Noh,” where Merrill interrupts his narrative to incorporate a “story Paul heard from an old Surrealist in Pau” (61). The tale gestures allegorically to the strange, indeed surreal,

circumstance of a PWA, a “doomed man” who is “sentenced to death” (61). When the “doomed man” expresses readiness for his sentence, asking the emperor “can’t we call it a night and conclude our business without further ado?,” the Emperor responds: “My poor friend, ... haven’t you understood? Your head was cut off an hour ago” (61). The tale seems to assert that Paul, like the “doomed man,” is caught in some bizarre state of the living dead. In “Afternoons at the Noh” Merrill suggests that the sentence is death but that the poem itself might be replicating the weird life-after-death construction of Paul. He equally suggests that perhaps the best course for JM, DJ, and even Paul would be to accept death as having already occurred.

The fluctuating treatment that the theme of impending death receives (denial, resignation, acceptance) demonstrates the influence of the classic elegy on Merrill. Yet he is not grappling with the actual death of a friend, as Milton and Tennyson do in their elegies but with the foreknowledge of the death of one. While the progression of the elegiac mourning process remains traditional in “Prose of Departure”, Merrill nevertheless begins his mourning process with the AIDS infection of his subject, and not with his death. In this very important sense, Merrill is treading new ground in the elegy.

Closely linked to the AIDS-specific theme of imminent death in “Prose of Departure” is imagery of illness, clinics, and doctors, mirroring the PWA’s encounter with hospitals, tests and infirmity. “Imagining it” registers Paul’s physical demise and his dependence on the clinic, which is transformed into a “vast and complex ... ocean liner” with a “gleaming, scentless corridor” and “unread” magazines -- a place where patients, or passengers, leisurely stroll from “one test ... to the next” (53). The clinic/illness trope

emerges also in “Afternoons at the Noh,” where illness and doctors figure prominently. The poem ends with a description of the night sky, in which a passing cloud momentarily covers the moon. Merrill sketches the stars the moment the moon is covered: “[t]he stars crowd forward, like wizards round a sickbed” (62). The reference to a “sickbed” demonstrates that Merrill’s, or at least JM’s “dark thought that fills the psyche” (the metaphor used to describe the cloud that covers the moon) involves illness. The medical diction Merrill employs to describe the cloud clearing the moon intensifies the clinical/illness trope: “Celestial recovery. Doctors amazed” (62). Metaphorically Merrill conflates sickness and the night sky, revealing JM’s obsession with Paul and the clinics, the “dark thoughts” JM is unable to keep at bay in “Afternoons at the Noh.”

Allusions to needles, tests, cultures, and blood suffuse “Geiger Counter” where the clinic/illness theme is reiterated even more prominently:

Syringe in bloom. Bud  
drawn up through stainless stem --  
O perilous blood!

Tests, cultures ... Weeks from  
one to the next. (69)

Quite dramatic in tone, this excerpt illustrates Merrill’s preoccupation with AIDS related visits to the clinic. In “Geiger Counter”, however, it is JM, and not Paul, who is at the clinic. The poem infers that JM is afraid that he too carries the HIV virus. We learn of JM’s “negative” status later in the poem when he asks, “What’s the story Doc?” (70). Not

only does this excerpt show the clinical theme (doctors, tests) but also hints at a third theme found in Merrill's reformulation of the elegy. JM's fear of his status in "Geiger Counter" is attributed to guilt.

Unlike the guilty recognition that the elegist might well be profiting poetically from a death, the guilt expressed in "Geiger Counter" has an AIDS-specific quality. DJ says to JM:

You're not dying! You've been reading too much Proust, that's all! I could be dying too -- have you thought about that JM? -- except that I don't happen to be sick, and neither do you. What we are suffering are sympathetic aches and pains. Guilt, if you like, over staying alive. (69)

The "sympathetic aches and pains" point to an underlying guilt of remaining healthy amid so much illness. Merrill's guilt underscores both the randomness and contagion of AIDS -- factors which contribute to the guilt associated with being a disease-free homosexual. DJ's words therefore reflect a property of guilt associated with AIDS that is particular to the present-day homosexual community.

Another value of guilt, also particular to an AIDS death (due to the disease's gradual nature), is suggested later in "Geiger Counter." DJ refers to Paul's initial diagnosis and expresses regret over proceeding with their travel plans: "You were right ... we should have scrapped the trip as soon as we heard. But God! even if you and I were on the way out, wouldn't we still fight to live a bit first, fully and joyously?" (69). The quandary presented in DJ's monologue -- how to behave in the presence of foreordained death -- echoes the poem, "Imagining it," in which the same subject is treated and the

same guilt is suggested through JM and DJ's self-justification for carrying on with their trip to Japan in the face of Paul's deteriorating condition.

The guilt Merrill associates with AIDS deaths conveys two emotional trials encountered by those surrounded by PWAs: the engaging in life's activities, even though a friend is dying of AIDS, and the remaining disease free as a member of a community highly affected by AIDS. Merrill is therefore reshaping the personal guilt that is usually linked to the actual writing of the classic elegy. In *In Memoriam*, for example, Tennyson describes his poetry: "My darkened ways / Shall ring with music all the same; / To breathe my loss is more than fame, / To utter love more sweet than praise" (77. 13- 16).<sup>3</sup> However, the guilt figured in "Prose of Departure" represents the shared guilt of a community -- a collective onus felt in the "high-risk" brotherhood of homosexuals and is unassociated with the elegiac poetic process. This community is articulated most clearly in "Geiger Counter," in which JM and DJ are actually "suffering ... sympathetic aches and pains" because "[f]our friends have died since December, [and] now Paul's back in the Clinic" (69). Paul is thus figured as a synecdoche for the infected community.

Merrill's description of Paul in "Strategies" certainly does not reflect the customary classic elegiac veneration of the deceased. Merrill does not glorify his subject; instead he achieves a tone of sadness by writing without hyperbole. The very commonness of Paul's description gives a far more personal picture of the elegiac subject with his: "hair silvered early, the trustful, inquisitive, near-sighted face, the laugh one went to such great lengths to hear" (57). Merrill stresses Paul's seeming ordinariness in

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<sup>3</sup> Merrill also expresses this type of classic elegiac guilt in "Strategies," "Afternoons at the Noh," and "In the Shop."

his intimate, yet slightly mundane, description, reinforcing the idea that Paul is a symbolic figuration of the gay PWA.

The elegiac community represented in "Prose of Departure" contains a broad, rather public, and literal quality not seen in the classic elegy. Traditionally, the community represented in the elegy serves, for the most part, as a poetic device. In "Lycidas", for example, Milton depicts a pastoral community of shepherds. Although the shepherds in "Lycidas" metaphorically represent a community of poets, the poetic community Milton figures is very small and insular, a very narrow segment of society that mourns the loss. The community trope in the classic elegy often only serves to demonstrate that the poet and the deceased "tread the same ground" (Tennyson) -- to help develop the progression from despair to hope.

Merrill's vision of the elegiac community supersedes the traditional, often superficial, elegiac community motif to become a focal point of the elegy. Due mainly to the presence of this vision of the elegiac community, Merrill's work takes on a more profound design than the traditional elegiac expression of sorrow. "Prose of Departure" represents a collective in mourning and, it seems, simultaneously provides that collective with a voice. Merrill's elegiac work therefore functions not only as an expression of grief but also as a consolidation of a collective. The urgency of Merrill's articulating of the gay culture's sorrow is suggested in "Kyoto": "'to die without the assurance of a cult was the supreme calamity' (L. Hearn)" (58). And Merrill offers his work as if it were in response to a pressing need for the awareness of a cult that could mourn the particularized death of its own members. Classic elegiac urgency conveys a determination to immortalize the

subject; the urgency witnessed in “Prose of Departure”, however, seems to demand that a crisis be addressed, a situation recognized, and a PWA remembered.

Further removed, but equally compelling, are allusions to the gay community figure in Merrill’s use of Buddhist dogma. References to Eastern spirituality are scattered throughout “Prose of Departure,” providing JM with some prospect of comfort during the mourning process. In “Strategies” JM appeals to Buddhist tenets: “If every trip is an incarnation in miniature, let this be the one in which I arrange myself like flowers. Aim at composure like the target a Zen archer sees through shut eyes. Close my borders to foreign devils. Take for model a cone of snow with fire in its bowels” (57). Invoking “incarnation” and “Zen,” Merrill refuses the Christian solace of classic elegists and instead turns to a religion which holds that sorrow is the universal experience of humankind and that the cause of sorrow is desire. The parallel of this religious principle to the homosexual community in the midst of the AIDS crisis is suggestive, linking sexual preference (desire) with the experience of AIDS (sorrow) in a community reviled by a Christian moral majority. Christianity, particularly as it has been represented by an American right, has been aligned with an emphatic denial of homosexual freedoms, and thus cannot afford solace for Merrill or the community his poetry tacitly addresses in his elegy for Paul.

But Paul is not the only PWA memorialized in *The Inner Room*. The final triptych in the collection is dedicated to David Kalstone, who died of AIDS-related illnesses in 1986. As we might anticipate, the first poem of the triptych, “Investiture At Cecconi’s,” opens with the elegiac subject still alive, but dying of AIDS. The first line of the poem

establishes David's HIV status by referring to "the diagnosis" (92). That David is described as "sick, [and] fearful" alludes to the preordained death theme seen in "Prose of Departure." "Investiture At Cecconi's" incorporates a sense that both David and the poet accept the impending death -- they are, in fact, preparing for it. While David is still alive, he surprises the poet with a gift -- a robe he has arranged to be made by a tailor in Venice:

Up my arm glistening sleeves are drawn. Cool  
silk in grave, white folds -- Oriental mourning --  
sheathes me, throat to ankles. (92)

Merrill uses images of mourning while he presents David as alive, thereby reinforcing the notion that mourning an AIDS death begins upon diagnosis. Furthermore, the "Oriental mourning" robe harkens back to the Buddhism in "Prose of Departure." Buddhism, and its inherent sorrow/desire implication, elicits images of Merrill's elegiac/real community. These lines therefore incorporate the gay community motif as well.

The second poem of the triptych, "Farewell Performance," features stronger references to the gay community but treats the impending death in a less accepting manner. David Kalstone is described as "gone" in this poem. For all that David's death has taken place, Merrill writes: "[We'll do] anything not to face the fact that it's over" (93). Although there seems to be an acceptance of David's upcoming death witnessed in "Investiture At Cecconi's," there are nevertheless sentiments of denial in "Farewell Performance." This marked change in the poet's attitude toward David's death echoes a



classic elegiac gesture -- the shifting reaction to death -- and repeats, and therefore strengthens, the same shifting trope introduced in "Prose of Departure."

Merrill elaborates on the "community living with AIDS" motif in "Farewell Performance." In the poem Merrill portrays two segments of the gay community -- the performers, who represent those with AIDS, and the audience who represent those who are disease-free. Upon finishing their performance, the "troupe" leaves the stage only to be called "back, again back" (93) by the audience. When the performers return for an encore, the audience:

jostle[s] forward

eager to hail them

more to join the troupe -- will a friend enroll us

one fine day? (94)

There seems to be an impulse, on behalf of the disease-free audience, not only to cheer the HIV positive dancers, but to join their ranks. The metaphoric performers, being applauded on stage, symbolize a sort of valorization of AIDS victims -- they are the AIDS champions, perhaps even the martyrs of the gay community. The moment of glorification is tempered with the ironic question: "will a friend enroll us / one fine day?" The contagious quality of AIDS is, of course, inferred; however the use of the word "friend," in the context of conferring a death sentence, unintentional though it be, is jarring. That the enrollment might take place on a "fine day" is equally disquieting. The image seems

paradoxical, and yet it reflects a circumstance in the gay community today -- gay men are, for the most part, infected with HIV by their lovers at a "fine" moment of intimacy.

The disturbing image of friends infecting each other is followed by lines that convey the audience's sense of repulsion of the performers: "Strange though. For up close their magic self-destructs. Pale, dripping, with downcast eyes they've seen where it led you" (94). The apotheotic moment is quelled by these final lines of the poem, and we see that Merrill is representing another complexity of AIDS in the gay community. Perhaps a kind of veneration for HIV carriers does exist in that community, but this veneration is unstable or disingenuous: "up close their magic / self-destructs." And Merrill infers, finally, that no audience member wants to join the "troupe" of the dying.

This poem exhibits a duality in the gay community -- an AIDS fence where one group stands on one side and looks over at the other. "Farewell Performance" suggests that the disease-free group feels "pity and terror" (94) toward the HIV carriers, while the PWAs have "downcast eyes" knowing they are facing death.<sup>4</sup> The poem is very much about the homosexual collective and the conflicting emotions that facing AIDS involves, no matter what side of the fence one is on. By the end of the poem, both David Kalstone and the poet seem more like representatives of their respective groups. Merrill's use of "we" when referring to the disease-free audience aligns him with that sector of the community, and the HIV troupe, it seems, is following David's path. The poem conveys both personal mourning (the poet's for David Kalstone) and collective mourning (gay

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<sup>4</sup> Merrill also evokes Aristotle's definition of tragedy with the phrase "pity and terror," hinting that, after having aroused powerful emotions in the spectator/reader, the audience, both in his poem and of his work, might experience a kind of release from the tension of living with AIDS or feel a cathartic effect.

men without AIDS for a gay men with AIDS) and therefore stresses Merrill's twofold elegiac purpose: to mourn AIDS deaths and consolidate a community.

That Merrill is purposely attempting to alter the conventional elegy is suggested in the final poem of the triptych, "Processional." In this poem Merrill alludes to traditional forms of mourning poetry and hints that his elegies incorporate traditional elements without entirely reproducing them:

To that same tune whereby immensely old  
Slabs of dogma and opprobrium,  
Exchanging ions under pressure, bred  
A spar of burnt-black anchorite... (95)

Because it is the last poem in the collection, its message seems pointed; Merrill is offering his work up as something bred from both "dogma" and "opprobrium" -- from both traditional form (the elegy) and discrimination (the homophobia associated with AIDS). In *The Inner Room*, Merrill appears to be reshaping traditional poetry of mourning to better reflect the homosexual experience since the specter of AIDS overwhelmed his community. Merrill's twofold agenda (expressing personal sorrow and providing a community with a voice) has political as well as poetic connotations. By publicly mourning deaths due to AIDS and thereby representing an otherwise under-represented community, Merrill is practicing a type of political activism. Douglas Crimp argues that, for gay men, publicly mourning an AIDS death and engaging in AIDS activism are closely connected. Crimp claims:

[D]uring the AIDS crisis there is an all but inevitable connection between the memories and hopes associated with our lost friends and the daily assaults on our consciousness. Seldom has a society so savaged people during their hour of loss. "We look upon any interference with [mourning] as inadvisable or even harmful," warns Freud. But for anyone living daily with the AIDS crisis, ruthless interference with our bereavement is as ordinary an occurrence as reading the *New York Times*. The violence we encounter is relentless, the violence of silence and omission almost as impossible to endure as the violence of unleashed hatred and outright murder. Because this violence also desecrates the memories of the dead, we rise in anger to vindicate them. For many of us, mourning becomes militancy. (8-9)

Merrill's elegiac poems in *The Inner Room* do not seem "to rise in anger", but they nevertheless represent the gay community's multi-faceted confrontation with AIDS. He writes of a collective struggling with clinics and blood tests, with fear of contagion, with guilty sentiments over being healthy and actively pursuing life, and with sorrow for a death. With Crimp's explication in mind, Merrill's elegies can be considered a form of militantly poetic mourning. However, the term "militant," with its angry implications, seems incompatible with Merrill's poetic aesthetic; after all, he likens a needle to a flower in "Geiger Counter": "[s]yringe in bloom. Bud / drawn up through stainless stem" (69). Although in *The Inner Room* Merrill paints a gay mourning picture that crosses over into the political realm, the poet seems, at times, to beautify the horrors associated with AIDS.

Focusing on the way in which Merrill represents AIDS in his elegies, I would suggest that he is what Joseph Cady would call a “counterimmersive” AIDS writer. Cady contends that there are two types of AIDS writing surfacing in contemporary gay literature: immersive and counterimmersive. *The Inner Room* is, according to Cady’s definition, counterimmersive AIDS writing because it “recognizes the dreadfulness of the disease, .... and also indicates the problem of denial in the larger society. But in context, its stance toward that denial seems ultimately deferential” (244). Cady asserts that counterimmersive AIDS literature employs distancing techniques which protect the reader from “too jarring a confrontation with the subject” of AIDS (244).

Looking at the elegiac “Prose of Departure” and David Kalstone triptych, we see that the AIDS imagery is treated in a wholly counterimmersive fashion. “Imagining it,” the first poem in “Prose of Departure,” illustrates AIDS distancing devices immediately. The title of the poem alone indicates that Merrill is merely imagining what Paul must be going through and that the entire scenario might be untrue. Merrill does not focus on the unpleasant aspect of AIDS in any prolonged manner in “Imagining it.” The bracketed denial of Paul’s physical demise due to AIDS -- “(Can a single week have changed him? Surely not)” (53) -- for example, exhibits a very counterimmersive quality, because the brackets seem to portray Paul’s failing health as a trifling, fleeting image, or a minor digression in the poem. The clinic/cruise ship analogy in “Imagining it” also shows a kind of beautification of the ugly realities of AIDS. The elaborate allegory about the emperor and his doomed friend featured in “Afternoons at the Noh” distances the reader from Paul and his AIDS diagnosis and therefore functions as a counterimmersive

strategy. Paul is merely “told” the story, and so he seems, somehow, non-participatory and removed from the strange tale. The legend only symbolizes Paul’s AIDS predicament and does not actually figure him in the story. Merrill therefore uses allegory to avoid any “jarring confrontations” with AIDS issues.

Merrill relates Paul’s death in a rather counterimmersive style in “Kyogen Interlude: At the Bank.” In the poem, Paul’s death is rendered in an anti-climatic tone. In fact, one could argue that Paul’s death is treated with silence. To Eleanor, a character who figures only in “Kyogen Interlude: At the Bank,” is assigned the somewhat despondent dialogue that tells us of Paul’s death: “[d]arling boy, nobody has to live. It’s what I came away from Paul’s service thinking. Nobody has to live” (65). The word “death” is notably absent from the line, while the word “live” is repeated twice. Merrill again seems to couch and mitigate the unpleasant reality of AIDS in his poetry.

The last poem, “In the Shop” is consistent with the counterimmersive approach Merrill takes to the subject of AIDS throughout the “Prose of Departure” section. “In the Shop” expresses a plea of sorts as Merrill writes: “[o]ur trip has ended, our quarrel / was made up. Why couldn’t the rest be?” (72). A desire to deny the entire AIDS issue and Paul’s death seems apparent in this line. This evident lack of confrontation with AIDS and the deaths the disease actuates accommodate Cady’s theory that “counterimmersive texts characteristically do nothing to dislodge whatever impulse their audience may have to deny the disease” (245). In this last poem of the elegiac “Prose of Departure,” Merrill transposes death into a word game: “Dyeing. A homophone deepens the trope” (72).

Merrill, therefore, again and again, quite resolutely employs various poetic tactics to effect a shield, for both the poet and the reader, from the horrific truths about AIDS.

In the second elegiac section looked at, the triptych for David Kalstone, the same counterimmersive quality appears. The first poem, "Investiture at Ceconi's," is a dream sequence -- the entire poem is (apparently) unreal. In "Farewell Performance," the second poem, Merrill describes Kalstone's AIDS death with language unrelated to AIDS: "You are gone. You'd caught like a cold their airy / lust for essence" (93). The poem therefore portrays an AIDS death without any real reference to the hideousness of the disease. Although Merrill's AIDS elegies seem to be breaking the silence surrounding AIDS, his aesthetics of denial actually accommodate a measure of silence toward the subject. Merrill's work, in this respect, seems paradoxical. Yet, as Cady suggests, "one benefit of counterimmersion is that it may effect a kind of bridge to the denying reader" (260).

The elegiac poetry in *The Inner Room*, in the context of AIDS literature, employs a counterimmersive technique which often diminishes the grimmer side of AIDS. However, by virtue of the subject's inclusion in his elegies, Merrill's work participates in the forging of a new art form. "Prose of Departure" and the elegiac David Kalstone triptych exhibit themes and tropes that address AIDS deaths from a homosexual perspective. The elegiac poems in *The Inner Room* therefore demonstrate a new register of elegiac convention -- an elegiac register that reflects the contemporary homosexual community's confrontation with AIDS. Through the use of such AIDS-deaths-specific tropes like impending death, illness and clinics, and sentiments of guilt over staying healthy and living amid so much death, Merrill voices the concerns of today's gay

community. Because that community is stigmatized, Merrill's elegiac poetry is all the more important for its fulfilling of a need for a representation of collective homosexual grief. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Merrill expresses that grief in terms untraditional in the elegy, suggesting that the AIDS elegy demands new motifs because traditional conventions do not resonate in contemporary culture. Merrill's AIDS elegies in *The Inner Room* therefore seem to mark the emergence of a new poetic form.



### 3

Richard Howard's *Like Most Revelations*: Variations on the Theme

The shining neutral summer has no voice  
To judge America, or ask how a man dies

W.H. Auden, "In Memory of Ernst Toller"

The AIDS elegies of Richard Howard's 1995 collection, *Like Most Revelations*, reflect a poetic approach emphatically distinct from the elegant sentimentality of Merrill's elegies in *The Inner Room*. In fact, Howard responds directly to Merrill in "For David Kalstone, 1932-86," in which he opens with a quote from Merrill. *Like Most Revelations* thus bears traces of the elegies of *The Inner Room*, suggesting the latter's contribution to the development of the distinct form of the AIDS elegy. Although Howard's approach to the elegy in *Like Most Revelations* is unlike Merrill's in *The Inner Room*, the poems nonetheless exhibit similarities. Motifs common to both poets' AIDS elegies strengthen the notion that the form emerging is shaping its own, new conventions. Because Howard's elegiac aesthetic in *Like Most Revelations* embodies nuances absent from Merrill's work, his poems exhibit another tendency within the AIDS elegy, consciously contrasted with Merrill's elegiac vision.

From the outset of his collection, Howard nods to Merrill: appropriately enough for this discussion, Howard tackles the convention of the muse. In Howard's only elegy in the collection that does not specifically evoke images of AIDS, he subverts the classic muse convention in much the same way as Merrill does in *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Like Merrill's, "Lesson 4: Madcap Muses," "To the Tenth Muse: A Recommendation" expresses the vapidness of the conventional muse figure. Howard hails Sappho, the ancient Greek poet, as his muse; however the reductive introduction prevents any sense of mythic grandeur to enter the poem as we are immediately made aware of Sappho's serviceability. The opening lines sharply etch Sappho's flat characterization and outline its cause:

Individual

no longer, but goddess, gimmick, grace, indeed you have been  
divided among our needs until all that remains is myth,  
the name we give to whatever exists  
specifically because it has language for its cause. (89)

Howard, like Merrill, renders the mythic muse, as she is traditionally understood, a deflated poetic tool. Howard's muse is a mere "gimmick" in the poet's game, called forth in the name of the poet's "need".

The "needs" Sappho meets are clearly outlined in a unimpassioned listing of her known personal history. Sappho is a gimmick because, presumably, she celebrates female-female love in the way that Plato celebrates male-male love. As if reaching the end of a check-list, Howard writes: "That is enough / for my purpose here / (one more use of you)" (89-90). The image conjured is of a poet's flipping through a reference book in search of a muse -- a necessary gesture, given the dictates of the elegiac form. The incorporation of the rationale for choosing Sappho as a muse does not nullify her importance in the poem -- she is, after all, invoked as the muse -- but it demarcates self-conscious subversion. Howard's muse might be merely a useful image, but, by calling her a muse and having her perform as such, he is, nevertheless harkening back to classic elegiac convention. The poet plainly hopes to "curry favor" for his elegiac subject, Lynda Schraufnagel, by writing to Sappho on her behalf. The very core of the poem is therefore essentially traditional. Howard appeals to a muse, asking that she watch over his dead friend, yet his method is almost sneeringly parodic.

The invocation scene exhibits a self-conscious unconventionality, undermining the classic form by blandly outlining the invocation as if it were the components of a letter of recommendation:

a brief review of the applicants major  
strengths and weaknesses as a potential graduate student  
and an assessment,

where possible, of

her stability, motivation, and aptness for working with others. (90)

The bland academic imagery employed is the antithesis of the traditional grand mythic imagery associated with a muse. This discord in form accentuates Howard's alteration to the convention. Like Sappho's check-list of traits, the poet's process is laid bare in these lines, and we sense that he is aware of plugging in the correct components to fit the form. In this manner, Howard treats his entire endeavor as a formula governed by convention, yet because the formula is unassociated with classic mythological themes, the poem accomplishes its subversion of convention. Acknowledging the disparity between the tone of his invocation and that of a more traditional tone, Howard asks Sappho to excuse the "absurd phraseology," claiming that these are simply "the forms we use now" (90). Howard is therefore, in a sense, contemporizing the conventional invocation in the elegy. This rearticulation, initially a sort of 'low invocation' written in academic vernacular, becomes a challenge to form altogether: "they [conventions] mean no more than / a touch of the hand" (90). For Howard it seems that a letter of recommendation, as

a form, is as restrictive and hollow as traditional elegiac form, and is therefore capable of achieving parallel goals, like contacting a muse, for example.

Although Howard continually alters classic rhetoric, he nonetheless maintains aspects of the traditional elegy. Like many elegists before him, Howard presents the muse with details of the deceased in order to encourage Sappho to look after his dead friend. However, the diction Howard employs is distinctly altered: "Ma'am, this is the case." Rendered in plain, solid, unromantic language, it has none of the occultism that normally surrounds the muses. Howard sustains this theme by telling Sappho:

And that's where you come in Ma'am, taking up  
the slack to have your say, your way, now that Lynda  
is beyond my help. (92)

These lines not only expand Howard's casual mode by incorporating slang, but also indicate a desire to allow Sappho to articulate any advice she might have for Lynda *in her own way*. Howard seems to be advocating freedom of form, suggesting that every poet should configure his own framework, forge his own path. He refuses to emulate the classical elegy -- and, by extension, the motifs and language associated with it -- because Sappho has a "lost/ inimitable/ manner of speaking" (92).

The last stanza of "To the Tenth Muse: A Recommendation" consolidates Howard's conception of both his technique and his muse. Like a closing argument, the crux of the issue is addressed in the final line: "our deepest desire aims at transformation" (93). A large component of this poem deals with transformation of some kind: Sappho is transformed into a muse, and the process of contacting her is transformed

into an academic exercise. Of course, the root of 'transform' is *form*, and the form of this poem is indeed quite consciously a transformation of an earlier model.

Howard blatantly chooses a figure most qualified for transformation in the opening lines of the poem. When he creates his muse, as Merrill creates Maria in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Howard chooses a muse appropriate to his subject and his lamenting persona – Sappho is suitable because she is a fellow poet, an academic, and a lesbian. Both Merrill and Howard prefer their muses to be closer to their personal realms. In Merrill's Ouija-board sphere of dead friends, poets, writers and intellectual icons, Maria is a more immediate figure (a dead friend) than the now arcane mythological muses. Similarly, Sappho better suits Howard's domain of academic jargon and protocol than any of the traditional nine muses. In these poems both poets rearticulate the classic muses of the elegy in order to show that the traditional mode has become out-dated.

Howard is obviously aware of the protocols of traditional elegiac form. However "To the Tenth Muse: A Recommendation" is the only elegy in *Like Most Revelations* that harkens back to it. For the most part, Howard's elegiac tendency seems to be to reject traditional elegiac convention -- a rejection that is tied, I believe, to the specter of AIDS that haunts the other elegies. Like Merrill, Howard evokes a new poetic register to record deaths associated with AIDS, yet Howard's response to Merrill's elegiac sensibility offers an alternate perspective on the burgeoning genre. In "For David Kalstone, 1932-86", in which he quotes Merrill's recounting of the sad task of scattering Kalstone's ashes into the Grand Canal, Howard opens with a reply to Merrill's verse:

My own stake in his story had been pulled up

years before such benignly recounted  
elemental emptyings, comminglings; (78)

Merrill's more sentimental approach to the elegy is immediately undercut. Howard finds the verse "benignly recounted" and, I would suggest, sets out to counter the benevolent manner with which Merrill writes. Howard bluntly describes Merrill's task in a dispassionate tone completely devoid of any sentimentality:

Which deeps have been further dimmed  
by a vial of surreptitious cinders  
poured from a gondola by prudent friends  
to join the Dreck of Ages; more recent swill  
discolors the ashes off Stonington; (80)

Howard's cynicism, which seems to be the dominant tone of his AIDS elegies, is not only distinct from Merrill's elegiac vision, but is so unconventional that it is jarring. Howard's irreverent elegiac impulse seems to be a decisive refusal to actually mourn the dead or to find any consolation in their death: he avoids emotional diction, he never adulates, and he never transfigures. His poems can, in this respect, be read as the antithesis of the traditional elegy. Howard prefaces "For Matthew Ward, 1951-90" with a segment explaining the poem's inception:

*[Matthew Ward] stipulated that I speak, at  
a memorial service, of his  
'professional development,'  
halted by AIDS. (22)*

The lines evoke a common enough elegiac trope -- the commemorating of the unfulfilled potential of the deceased. However Howard blatantly overturns the convention later in the poem, complaining about his having been forced to write the elegy: "having no wish / to commemorate you in your accomplishments, / though forced to do so by your dying writ" (24). Howard's elegy for Matthew Ward is therefore completely deflated. The impetus behind the elegy, it seems, is duty and not any true desire to poetically memorialize a friend. "For Matthew Ward, 1951-90" conveys a quality of resentment, on the part of the poet, at having to write any kind of poem of mourning at all, and so paradoxically, Howard refuses to mourn his elegiac subject.

The poetic refusal to mourn is part of Howard's overall rejection of traditional elegiac form. The poet's lack of faith in the traditional elegiac model is touched on in "For James Boatwright, 1937-88":

for there has been too much  
shaving at the cedar-wood round the lead --  
the lead itself powdered away at last,  
the pencil pointless. (56)

From a traditional elegiac perspective, Howard's AIDS elegies might indeed be considered "pointless" -- the poems neither praise the dead nor console the living. In fact, the elegies deny the reader any type of consolation precisely through images like the pointless pencil. Contrary to elegiac convention "For James Boatwright, 1937-88" ends on a particularly disconsolate note:

You went with a sigh of relief -- to me a sign



that any past we might hope to reclaim  
spreads like an oil slick, wide behind us,  
and the oncoming

years of retrieval diminish even now  
until our name becomes, to memory,  
a synonym for weakness endured,  
or worse still, adored. (56)

Certainly not consolatory, the final lines also evoke another Howardesque elegiac approach – rather than glorifying his subjects' virtues, Howard clings to their faults. By highlighting the elegiac subjects' shortcomings and vices, Howard repudiates the familiar hyperbolic praising of the deceased. In "For Matthew Ward, 1951-90" Howard provides his reasoning for such repudiation:

Our gifts belong to the world,  
whether avowed or privately bestowed;  
but our failings – all that we cannot give away --  
belong to those that love us, those we love. (24)

All the AIDS elegies in *Like Most Revelations* in fact focus on their subjects' faults, which, together with the lack of consolation and desire to memorialize the dead, affect tones of anger, resentment and deep cynicism in the poetry. Howard emphatically refuses to beatify an AIDS death, and so, perhaps, his elegies are "pointless" in the traditional sense, because they register what the poet understands as pointless AIDS deaths. Howard

therefore challenges traditional elegiac precepts and creates a kind of anti-classic elegy -- his poems exude sentiments of anti-glorification, anti-consolation, and anti-memorialization. Howard's issue with Merrill's elegiac style, revealed in "For David Kalstone, 1932-86", might involve not only Merrill's "benign" aesthetic, but his classic elegiac pattern as well. *The Inner Room* does, after all, incorporate vestiges of the traditional elegiac model (the doubt to consolation trajectory, for example); however Howard does seem to value the newer themes related to AIDS deaths found in *The Inner Room*.

Like the AIDS elegies in *The Inner Room*, Howard's elegies relate the subject's HIV positive status, evoke images of illness and imminent death, describe the elegiac community as homosexual, and connect sex with death. Howard's dark poetic aesthetic, however, informs the AIDS elegiac tropes in his poems, and his poems therefore move in an entirely different direction than Merrill's do. In *Like Most Revelations* illness is associated with isolation, and knowledge of death is connected with a longing for death; the mourning gay community is portrayed as though it were becoming extinct, and homosexual sex is pathologized. The desolate perspective is rendered in plain language, and, because of the straight-forward diction, the work reads as far less counterimmersive than Merrill's AIDS elegiacs do, although, in the final analysis, Howard too qualifies as a counterimmersive AIDS writer, partly because silence is a theme in the text. The theme of silence, in the context of the AIDS elegy, rings a political note, giving Howard's poetry a somewhat more militant quality than Merrill's. Howard's perspective on the

AIDS elegy both evokes Merrill's work and to a certain degree debunks Merrill's genteel elegiac approach.

The illness theme in Howard's elegies is, for example, unlike Merrill's evasive flirting with the topic -- JM wonders of Paul: "(Can a single week have changed him? Surly not)" (*The Inner Room* 53). Instead, Howard's AIDS elegies delve into the illness theme and speak in detail of the physical demise AIDS actuates, while linking AIDS-related illness to images of pain and isolation. In "The Victor Vanquished" Tom Victor's AIDS-infected body is described as a "desecrated pond / where all fish die, where only scum persists" (65). In the same poem, Howard illustrates the physical suffering involved with dying from an AIDS-related illness:

the pain was all yours

and all you had; by the end you hugged it

closer than their anodyne substitutes:

pain was your one religion, pain was bliss. (65)

Howard's vision of the physical pain caused by the AIDS virus is entangled with the sufferer's impulse toward isolation. Howard's elegies often depict the dying elegiac subject's friendships, in order to demonstrate the PWA's withdrawal from society. He posits that Tom, in "The Victor Vanquished," wondered of his friends: "who were these dim intruders / presuming they inhabited your pain, // as if there could be room for them as well?" (66). The same thematic is rendered in "For Matthew Ward, 1951-90," in which Howard writes: "You argued against your friends, / for sickness tries to shrink the world

to itself" (24). Howard's interpretation of the illness theme presents images of disconnection from loved ones and emphasis on physical pain.

The pain and isolation of AIDS highlighted in Howard's elegies often suggests the subject's desire to die. For example, the motifs of isolation from friends and physical suffering are interwoven with Tom's welcoming his own death in "The Victor Vanquished":

For two years, the body alone with its pain

suspended friendship like the rope that holds

a hanged man. All you wanted was to drop

this burden, even if it meant that you

would be the burden dropped. (66)

Howard's image of "a hanged man" and mention of "two years" evoke the foreordained death theme of the AIDS elegy. The above lines also express the "burden" of AIDS; the isolation, the pain, and the knowledge of the inevitable approach of death combine to form a burden that becomes too heavy for Tom. Howard writes about the dark side of a death by AIDS, about the ugly truths of the disease, and he tells us that, after two years of pain and loneliness, Tom wanted to die. Howard's bleak elegy for James Boatwright parallels "The Victor Vanquished" in this respect. Boatwright's ailing health is referred as: "the long downward months of which you spent / every moment dying" (55); and, later in the poem, Howard claims that Boatwright "went with a sigh of relief" (56).

Allusions to death are also employed in reference to Howard's gay elegiac community. For example, Howard's dismal portraiture of the homosexual community is apocalyptic in "For David Kalstone, 1932-86":

Who could have thought that irregular line-up  
of communicants at the alter-rail

of sex, in which we took our place, would one day  
possess the power to destroy itself? (81)

In Howard's poetics, it seems, AIDS is the unspoken weapon in the gay community's arsenal of self destruction. Later in the same poem, Howard poignantly but brutally contends: "...I live, like most of us, in a world / which has ceased to exist" (82). AIDS has irrevocably altered, and essentially ended, the world of Fire Island and New York bathhouses that the gay liberation movement of the '70s celebrated so freely. However, Howard typically does not sentimentalize the loss of an era, nor a lifestyle, nor even his seemingly dead community; he instead furnishes his view of the homosexual community with a pessimistic realism that forbids elegiac lamentation.

The gay community is also represented in "For Robert Phelps, Dead at 66." Although Robert Phelps is portrayed as neither gay nor HIV positive, the subject of AIDS nonetheless surfaces in the elegy:

At least it was not the plague, not *our* plague, only  
Parkinson's, only cancer. You smiled,  
invoking probable pretexts - embarrassed

(such was your humility) to die

Among the victims, to benefit even

erroneously from the emotion

reserved for the unwarrantable dead. (43)

Of course the phrase “*our* plague” connotes the gay community’s dealing with AIDS: Howard is, therefore, connecting images of dying to images of the gay community and to images of AIDS in the poem. People who have died from the ravages of AIDS are austere considered “the unwarrantable dead”. Quite distinct from Merrill’s elegiac veneration of his subjects, Howard’s poems seem angry at, and almost scornful of, the dead.

The angry overtones of the poetry, witnessed in lines like “the unwarrantable dead,” suggest an exasperation at the randomness and remedilessness of the AIDS crisis. Howard’s anger emerges, however, on several levels in the elegies, and his accusatory tone is directed at the isolative reflex of the deceased he describes. The final lines of “The Victor Vanquished,” for example, seem severe:

Life in general is, or ought to be,

as Crusoe said, one universal Act

of Solitude. You made it death as well. (66)

Howard’s work therefore also exhibits a measure of anger toward PWAs who, in pain, cut themselves off from their friends. The poetry’s anti-elegy qualities might also be read as expressions of anger – perhaps an anger directed not only at the poetic festooning of

the bleak subject of AIDS, but also at the glossing-over of the disease's ugly facts that facilitates wide-spread denial of the pandemic.

The denial of AIDS is, for example, implied in "For David Kalstone, 1932-86," in which the elegiac subject died of an "undisclosed disease" (82). Kalstone's silence on the subject of AIDS becomes a theme in the elegy:

and ever since you played on us  
that vanishing-trick called dying,  
I am left with the consequence of silence --  
it must always be a silence *of a sort*,  
of course, never zero silence: those last days  
of your undisclosed disease, your silence  
made the one intolerable answer ... Now  
that I live, like most of us, in a world  
which has ceased to exist, it will have to be  
your silence I harp on, look to, learn from ... (82)

The silence surrounding Kalstone's death hints at the stigma the disease has in the gay community. Because Kalstone never disclosed his HIV status, Howard suggests that Kalstone was ashamed of his AIDS status. The theme of silence in Howard's elegy therefore exposes the stigmatization of PWAs and also serves to break the silence surrounding AIDS. Taking up the familiar slogan, Howard uses silence as a metaphor for death: "it must always be a silence *of a sort*." The connection between silence and death

is made quite clearly in "For Robert Phelps, Dead at 66" in which Howard cites the highly politicized "Silence = Death" motto:

Silence = Death, according to the slogan  
broadcast for AIDS. Yours was another  
silence, as you said with an absurd chuckle;  
a guy can't go on living all the time. (43)

In these lines death is again portrayed as a type of silence. However, by incorporating the Silence = Death slogan into the poem, Howard adds a political edge to his poetry. The elegies speak out against the silence surrounding AIDS simply by virtue of their PWA subjects, and the theme of silence in the poetry strengthens the voice. Yet Howard's socio-politico imagery is intricately woven throughout the collection, and intensifies the historical import of his work. A criticism of the contemporary American legal system is featured, for example, in "The Victor Vanquished":

The verdict of their small-claims court: it takes  
all kinds to make a sex. Had you made yours?  
Everything is possible but not

everything is permitted. (66)

Homosexuality is not permitted in some American States; in fact, laws against sodomy are still in place in Massachusetts, Georgia, and Idaho to name but three states. The judicial system simply does not recognize homosexuality everywhere in the USA -- "not / everything is permitted". The "small-claims court" is therefore a heavily loaded image,



because it calls to mind both the unqualified discrimination against PWAs, and the legal challenges that the discrimination creates.

The *New York Times*, mentioned in "For Robert Phelps, Dead at 66," is also a heavily laden allusion for the gay community -- it has been since the AIDS crisis began. Howard's choice to include a reference to the internationally known newspaper contributes to the very timely quality of his work. Infamous for its misrepresentation of AIDS, the *New York Times* symbolizes an ignorant public who assume that, once all the fags and drug addicts become infected with AIDS, the disease will go away, never having touched their "mainstream" lives. The editorial that evinced these callous and uninformed precepts was published in the summer of 1989, and spawned a huge ACT UP demonstration that attracted a large police presence. The newspaper became known for reporting half-truths about AIDS and maligning high-risk groups like the homosexual community. Therefore the reference to the *New York Times* -- an extremely powerful public voice -- connotes ignorance of AIDS issues, discrimination against homosexuals, and indeed a flagrant disregard for the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who were already infected with HIV in '89.

Howard more fully explores the potent image of the *New York Times* in "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals Reported to Have AIDS Virus." The poem, the last in the collection, does not record the death of a friend of the poet's; rather, "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals Reported to Have AIDS Virus" elegizes a way of sex for homosexuals that is also a casualty of the AIDS pandemic. Howard's bleak imagery surrounding the gay community and homosexual sex elsewhere in the collection nods to this final vision of

the dying gay community and its dead practices. The poem illustrates the homosexual community's communal losses due to AIDS -- part of their life-styles and their sex-lives-- and documents a condemning public who recoils from the homosexual community in their time of sorrow. The poetic form Howard employs in "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals" is unique among his AIDS elegies (although not to the collection, as "Occupations" is also a fusion of epistolary and dramatic monologue), and allows Howard to explore AIDS elegiac tropes in a manner denied to the apostrophic form his personal elegies take.

By writing in the first person, Howard gives the poem an uncensored feel -- the PWA is "downright" in his letter, and Jane is equally honest in her speech to her sister. "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals" juxtaposes truths held by members of the vilified homosexual community to those of members of the vilifying heterosexual community, and this juxtaposition exposes today's divided society -- a juxtaposition that gives the poem its weighty historical significance. The poem seems like a rather pointed commentary on present day, (North) American attitudes toward AIDS and homosexual sex. Howard alludes to AIDS-reawakened discrimination against homosexuals in his personal elegies (Tom's small-claims court, Kalstone's shame of dying of AIDS-related illness); however "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals" elaborates the socio-political discrimination against gays. The poem, in fact, exhibits several layers of discrimination. By rendering them in matter-of-fact tones, Howard implies that discrimination is simply part of gay culture. For example, the PWA concludes his candid account of being beaten by the truck-driver with: "all in a night's work" (108). From the concluding remark, we

get the sense that the crime went unreported and that the PWA's experience is not an uncommon one. Howard therefore paints gay-bashing as part of the gay experience, as part of the dying homosexual community's ethos. Partly because the crime perpetrated against the PWA is linked to sex with his perpetrator, the entire sexual episode Howard develops is tainted with images of the criminal, the forbidden, and the seedy. Howard depicts homosexual sex throughout *Like Most Revelations* as a kind of pathological compulsion that leads to AIDS; in "The Victor Vanquished," for example, he writes: "in love / you were a shadow chasing shadows, / yet the habit of the chase enthralled you, / and you could not desist" (66). This jarring perception seems to reflect Leo Bersani's contention that heterosexual-ruled society portrays the AIDS crisis "as if gay men's 'guilt' were the real agent of infection . . . [and that] everyone agrees that the crime is sexual" (210). In Howard's poem Jane's heterosexist monologue seems to confirm Bersani's observation, as she, quite confidently, contends that homosexuality is depraved and that AIDS is a result of transgressive intramale sex:

what did [Jack] get out of what he did that has to be paid for by getting  
AIDS? ... I'm not saying he doesn't deserve it, it's just that ... you'd better  
understand the satisfaction -- no the rush, the thrill, or whatever doing  
things like that to other men could give him. If AIDS is so awful, then that  
has to have been so good. Do you see? You have to realize the joy of it if  
you're going to reckon up the pain. (110)

By using the words "rush" and "thrill" to describe homosexual sex, Jane impresses upon her listener her belief that it is exhilaratingly dangerous and illicit. And from Jane's

perspective, those who engage in what she understands as prohibited sex warrant punishment. However, as Douglas Crimp notes, the advent of AIDS has made clear that gay sexual “pleasures were never tolerated [by society] anyway: [homosexuals] took them. And now [homosexuals] must mourn them too”(11). Howard’s motifs of AIDS related homosexual discrimination, combined with the graphically rendered sexual encounter and AIDS elegiac tropes, seem to poetically consolidate Crimp’s conclusion.

The large scale reticence of homosexuals rekindled by AIDS -- or perhaps merely revocalised, as Crimp suggests -- is poetically illustrated by Jane’s limited vocabulary, which does not include the word “homosexual” or even “sex”: she calls homosexuals “the other kind” and intramale sex “do[ing] things with others” (107). Her speech is full of ellipses and ambiguous pronouns like “it” and “they”. The dramatic monologue therefore exposes a suppression of homosexuality and intramale sex, as well as a denial of the entire gay culture’s existence. The silence encoded in Jane’s monologue (the heterosexual voice) is precisely what the epistle’s direct diction and frank sexuality counter. The PWA (the homosexual voice) talks about “gay men,” detailing how he went “down on [the truck-driver] in the back of his truck” (106). Howard’s methodology allows him to both expose the crippling silence surrounding the gay experience and to provide the discriminated-against, dying-homosexual PWA with a voice, thus breaking the silence around not just AIDS, but also gay culture. But he infuses the poem nonetheless with the sense that silence ultimately prevails. The PWA does not expect his “downright” letter to be published, and his voice will never reach the Maureens and Janes of this society -- the form the poem takes of two distinct disconnected voices

makes that abundantly clear. The theme of silence in the final lament of the collection seems to have a broad scope: silence is rendered as a multi-faceted agent of homosexual discrimination. The theme of silence, seen elsewhere in Howard's AIDS elegies, is associated with AIDS, death, and homosexual discrimination; however in "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals " the theme receives large-scale treatment and conveys a sense that the silence enveloping the homosexual community equals death on several levels: the death of a PWA, a community, and a sex-life. Howard gives silence a manifold resonance by creating an unnamed, gay PWA, who is symbolic of the dying gay community, speaking of his sexual practices as "one dimension of the life [he is] in / a final position (no evasions!) / to evaluate" (105). The letter reads like an attestation to a way of sex for homosexuals -- a way of sex that perpetuates the wide-spread HIV infection within the homosexual community, and a way that the threat of AIDS now forbids.

Howard's personal elegies do link homosexual sex explicitly with AIDS. In "For James Boatwright, 1937-88," for example, he writes: "Whereof the nightly exercise . . . / kept you coming back for more [until struck] . . . by an incurable disease" (55). And his elegies also hint at the illicit quality of homosexual life-style: in "For Robert Phelps, Dead at 66," Howard remembers shocking Phelps with details of "last night's scurrilous episode" (40). With "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals Reported to Have AIDS Virus" Howard offers explicit intramale sexual imagery and makes the connection between homosexual sex and AIDS a focus of the poem. The poem therefore seems very much in keeping with Crimp's notion that "alongside the dismal toll of death, what many

[homosexuals] have lost is a culture of sexual possibility” (11), for Howard recounts a sexual episode now deemed “unsafe” because of AIDS and writes that price of that episode for the PWA is not only death generally but the death of desire: he is “no longer able to excite / [himself]” (111).

The physical demise that AIDS occasions is, perhaps predictably, more fully developed in the last elegy of the collection. AIDS-related illness is, for example rendered in explicit terms of physical ailment, hospitalization, and the pervasive guilt of being a homosexual infected with HIV:

the hospital routine  
laboriously contends with new bouts  
of pneumocystis,  
thereby bestowing leisure to survey  
my escalating KS lesions -- caught  
*red-handed.* (104)

Despite the forthright diction, Howard’s writing would still be considered counterimmersive by Cady, simply because it is the hospital that “contends” with the PWA’s illness, which, of course, affects a type of distancing device for the PWA and the reader. Nonetheless Howard’s methodology in this poem strikes a fairly austere note. Like his personal elegies, in which men die in pain and are isolated from friends and family, “Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals” focusses on a man in pain -- a nameless dying PWA, who is surrounded by drug-wielding nurses and a well-meaning social worker, trying to help him cope with his impending death. The themes of isolation and

knowledge of imminent death are therefore intertwined -- it is not a family member or friend who comforts the dying PWA, but a civil servant. The entire writing of the letter is, in fact, a therapeutic exercise for the PWA, recommended to him by his social worker. The letter is therefore an exploration into the motif of knowledge of impending death, because it offers a view into a dying man's reflections on his life as a homosexual and as a PWA. The therapeutic letter reads like an attestation to an otherwise denied experience: the truck-driver conceals his homosexuality, and the PWA deems his homosexual life something "I could never acknowledge to you the *New York Times*"(109). The poem therefore incorporates a broader dimension of the isolation trope and portrays a larger homosexual isolation -- in fact, ostracism -- from society.

Howard's AIDS elegiac tropes and themes, seen in his personal elegies, are intricately overlapped in "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals" and seem to converge in this final poem of the collection, which registers the loss of a way of sex. Howard's allusions to the covert quality of homosexual sex in his personal elegies seem more evolved in the final poem (a story never before told, "Mr. X" and "Name Withheld"); the silence surrounding AIDS and homosexual culture is linked to the prejudice against homosexuals and PWAs as well as to the death of gay culture, individuals and a sex-life. Also the isolation due to AIDS-related-illness is developed into a kind of ostracism from heterosexual dominated society in "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals Reported to Have AIDS Virus." In fact, most AIDS elegiac tropes receive fuller, perhaps even bolder, treatment in "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals." As a result of this sharp-edged poetic strategy, the poem is very "in your face," to use an apt colloquialism. Howard's somber,

slightly disarming, aesthetic permeates the poem, imbuing it with a despairing, gloomy savour: the PWA wonders if his "sexually myopic" life is not "A tribal tale / of A Thousand Nights / and a Night, except that this Scheherazade / gets herself 86'd" (109 & 110). Howard figures the homosexual "tribe" as condemned to death throughout the collection, and this final poem offers no relief from the dismal portraiture. Howard's anger, witnessed in his personal elegies, might also be at work in this poem. "Man Who Beat Up Homosexuals" seems like a rather militant declaration, breaking the silence surrounding AIDS and homosexual practices by describing a violent sexual episode; yet it provides no hope that the silence (and by extension death) will soon end. The subject of the poem, the immediacy of Howard's diction and the narrative quality of his work seem to form an uncensored, unabashed testimonial of the poet's moment in history -- a catastrophic moment in the homosexual community's history. Howard's elegiac tendency is so bleak because he examines the enormous death toll around him, unflinchingly refusing to sugar-coat the dismal effects AIDS has had on the gay community. His poems never really mourn his subjects; rather they register the subjects' death due to AIDS, concentrate on their subjects' faults, detail the prejudice against PWAs in the midst of their isolation and pain, and proffer no consolation for the situation. Howard's mourning tactics seem to ally themselves with a militant faction of AIDS activists who cry, "Turn your grief to anger." As Crimp points out in "Mourning and Militancy," the gay community is not completely united in its approach to mourning its losses due to AIDS. Howard's elegies seem angry enough to fall into the "activist" camp -- a camp that Crimp tells us perceives public mourning rituals as "indulgent, sentimental, defeatist" (5).



Perhaps his activist leanings explain why Howard takes Merrill to task. Merrill's AIDS elegiac style is rather indulgent, certainly sentimental -- but perhaps not entirely defeatist. As Crimp notes, public mourning rituals "may have their own political force," and ultimately any poetic representation of AIDS helps break the palpable silence that encompasses AIDS issues and the homosexual community.

Although Merrill and Howard treat AIDS elegiac tropes dissimilarly, the poets' elegies share common themes: they convey the elegiac subject's serio-status, depict images of clinics and illness, allude to the opprobrium around homosexuality in today's society, and model their elegiac community after the present day grieving gay community. Their works therefore suggest that a new form of poetic mourning is being established -- a form that addresses a contemporary concern from a homosexual perspective. Writing poems of loss, both poets produce texts that exhibit a classic elegiac influence on some level; however it is clear that they introduce new tropes to communicate the sorrow particular to a homosexual living in the age of AIDS. Merrill's and Howard's poetry of mourning is evidence that the AIDS-stricken homosexual community is vocalizing its sorrow in its own way, and thereby poetically consolidating the community's experience. Their works are poetic witnesses to their historic moment: they break the audible silence around AIDS and homosexual culture and write about the community's early encounter with the disease. Merrill's and Howard's elegiacs, I would argue, contribute to "the assurance of a cult" of gay mourners who have lost friends, lovers, and a sex-life to AIDS.

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