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A Slow Reading in Matthew Dickman's Elegiac and Nostalgic Poetry

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A SLOW READING IN MATTHEW DICKMAN'S
ELEGIAC AND NOSTALGIC POETRY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues the necessity of post modern elegy to adapt to new forms in writing in response to the indifference to death in modern societies, and the recklessness towards such an event. The cotemporary style of writing depends on series of elegies, which express an extended form of mourning as opposed to the circumscribed grief of an individual elegy. Postmodern analytical writings that discuss grief and mourning provide an ethical insight towards the continuous commemorations of the dead. It invites us to rethink the concept of mourning outside the clinical analysis of Freud. Emerging from the theories that study mourning and its depiction in poetry, this work tries to connect these theories to contemporary poets by focusing on the poetry of Matthew Dickman, setting him as an example of postmodern poets. Dickman often addresses the topic of elegy in his poetry. In his book, *Mayakovsky's Revolver*, he devotes a section of elegies to his dead brother. I do a slow reading of a group of his elegies. In doing so, I show the critical appearance of mourning in his daily life, linking his perpetual mourning to a new understanding of this theme where mourning departs its original frame into a new conception of continuous remembrance.

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A SLAOW READING IN MATTHEW DICKMAN'S

ELEGIAC AND NOSTALGIC POETRY

The dehumanization of death in our modern age raises an ethical question, to which, post modern elegy responds. Mourning, as a motivator for writing elegies, has been discussed widely by theorists who have depended primarily on the Freudian conception of explaining this culturally based response to death. However, in the last century, death has become so devalued as a result of the large numbers of deaths during the world wars and the media accounts of them. Death became regularly experienced on the news and live screens (and sometimes it was politically exploited). This created the urge for a new discourse to deal with and examine mourning. Beginning from post-World War II, there has been a new ethical insight that has emerged in the discussion of mourning. Theorists identified the unethical attitude of indifference and the politicizing of death by rereading mourning as a response to such dehumanization and politicizing. Contemporary theorists posit perpetual mourning, which departs from the negative horizon of the Freudian understanding of this issue and move toward a new context, where the responsibility of remembering the deceased and granting the dead symbolic space among the living becomes necessary from an ethical perspective.

In poetry, this space is offered by continuous commemorating through series of elegies. My work discusses the poetry of Matthew Dickman, in an effort to address the challenges of devising an adequate definition for a general conception of contemporary

elegiac and nostalgic poetry of grief. Dickman has dedicated many poems to the issues of grief and nostalgia. In his book of poems, *Mayakovsky's Revolver*, he devotes a section to elegies for his dead brother. He is not the only one to focus on elegies in this way, but his elegies chart new territory for extending genre of postmodern elegy. Contemporary elegy is usually written in free verse; its theme of mourning is recurrent. It is intended to focus mainly on the mourner, linking his or her everyday cares to the deceased. Consequently, mourning is perpetual; as daily events force the mourner to recall his or her memories of departed loved ones, nostalgia rises up as part of grief, bringing up desirable memories of the past. *Slow Reading in Dickman's Elegiac and Nostalgic Poetry* covers the topic of elegy as a formal expression of mourning. It examines the rhetorical content of elegiac poetry's depiction of grief and nostalgia, through close readings of Dickman's poems. The slow reading, as a mode of literary analysis that devotes a wide time frame to the appraisal of each text, depicts in its methodology a strategy for reading the broad space of mourning in Dickman's poems, showing the effect of the new form of elegy and its departure from the traditional one.

-Flexible Forms-

Postmodern poets have developed new styles to keep up with the fast pace of postmodern urban life. They have freed the poem of any restricting structure and adopted different techniques that help them to express their feelings. Dickman, for example, uses the technique of the subtext or what I define as embedded writing to reveal his inner sentiments. The poems that I study include another layer of writing inside the written texts. By investigating the textuality in his works, I link it to the new concept of grief and

nostalgia, which is as I see it an invitation to think differently about these themes, which traditionally include a denial of death, praise for the deceased, and a promise of immortality.

Arguing that elegy as a formal genre of expressing grief has challenged its own definition by formulating a kind of poem that resists formality; I analyze how the elegy has become a continuous series of confessions about the mourner's feelings. First, I will give examples of contemporary poets other than Dickman who have adopted this procedure of speaking about grief in a devoted collection instead of individual, single poems. Generally speaking, post-modern poetry has rebelled against the traditional conception of formal construction of a fixed poetic order. Many critiques state that the contemporary configuration of poetry has become more flexible, producing a form that emerges from the content of the poem. However, in *Unending Design, the Forms of Postmodern Poetry*, Joseph Conte points out that the form of a poem comes as a reaction to the understanding of realities in one's own time. Also, his reading of postmodern poetry, states that "the divine order as a single voice of authority has withdrawn to be replaced by a cacophony of channeled voices, or by no voice at all; the new age offers us either the comic confusion of a hundred cajoling, admonitory sources, or a sublime but empty 'space music' of planetary motion and interstellar dust" (17). This symphony of voices has shaped an experimental form of writing that does not correspond to any previous, familiar structures. This is why he states that the "open serial" (17) is a form of writing that has become popular in postmodern poetry.

But, while Conte confirms seriality as an internal aspect of the poem, I see that the elegy specifically has developed these serials in an external form. While each poem expresses an exceptional moment of poetic revelation that does not share a certain structure with other poems, there is a tendency in postmodern poetry to express mourning in a collective order. This order allows the poet to capture these different moments, gathering them in one collection and presenting them to the reader as an open serial, without a beginning or an ending point. The reader is free to start where he wants, going back and forth without losing connection, because each poem is an independent piece, yet, interdependent with other poem in the collection.

- Aspects of form: on Time and Dickman's Embedded Writing-

Time is an essential feature in establishing a framework for elegiac and nostalgic poetry, since it deals with specific history and dated events. In *The Power of Form*, Gilbert Rose affirms that the two characteristics of time as either moving in linear order forward or going backward is not restricting in literature. After quoting Albert Einstein's claim that the borders between past, present, and future are merely an illusion, Rose says, "Aesthetic form reconciles these two aspects of time by treating time as plastic material suitable for aesthetic transformation; that is, as having both the unity of inner consistency and also the malleability to undergo various changes" (145). The collapse between tenses is a remarkable feature in presenting the view of the mourner in recalling the past and bringing it to the present.

Another aspect of formality is concerned with what I would call *embedded writing*, which is writing within writing. It gives a deeper implication by insuring a double recognition for the written text. It is one of the recognizable internal methods that add an aesthetic dimension to the poem, which can be traced in some of Dickman's elegies. By using this technique, he draws the reader's attention to the words that have been signified as visual units. When the words are transformed into a sort of iconic representation, they signify the overlapping urgency of their connotation. Dickman continuously refers to his brother as "my brother" instead of mentioning his brother's name. This is an example of the way he draws the attention to the relationship that connects them instead of pronouncing the name, which would identify his brother as a separate individual. The form of possession is included in the reference to the dead brother to highlight this continuous brotherhood relation, emphasizing the connection to him by relating the brother to himself. Similarly, highlighting words or sentences through the embedded writing brings to focus the congenital importance of their references. In Dickman's "Dog", for example, the word *choice* is turned into a written symbol; an icon that represents the central struggle in the poem, the struggle of the speaker's irresolute decisions and his hesitant choices. Dickman took advantage of the aspects of internal writing to express himself. Once, he uses the written words as physical evidences of memory that he cannot escape in "Grief". Another time, he projects his ideas as a neglected letter that does not get response in "Dear Space". This form could be identified as an emerging aspect that would grant the poem a visual design.

- Critics and Post Modern Grieving -

In addition to the open conversation about the form of the elegy, the substance of elegiac poems has changed in accordance with the new styles of form. Since form has an effect on the content, different theories about the subjects of this genre of poetry have recently been articulated. The feelings of grief and nostalgia have been considered a continuous topic of discussion concerning the value of such representations. Sometimes, acknowledging grief in poetry is looked upon as a healing process for the living and other times as an ethical duty toward the dead. Anne Carson, for example, conveys the theme of the healing effort in *Nox*, a book of elegies for her dead brother. If translation is such a hard task as Carson says, “I came to think of translating as a room ...where one gropes for the light switch” (98). Then, her effort to “translate” the words of her dead brother could be explained as her effort to find a path out of her mourning dilemma as she tries to make meaning of these memories for herself, as she tries to find that switch light. She exemplifies the theoretical opinions that claim that grief and nostalgia come as a result of survivors’ need to comprehend tragic events in life. Clifton Spargo, on the other hand, conceives of grief as the notion of questioning the responsibility of the self toward the dead. Emerging from the Freudian theory, in which the mourner’s responsibility to his society is to celebrate survival over the incident of death, and therefore, chooses to move on by overcoming his grief; Spargo concludes that there is an ethical response to this reaction. The response is embodied in the expanded remembrance, which gives illegibility to the form of extended grieving in post modern elegy to be popular. Between the two concepts of grieving, whether it is for the benefit of the mourner or the deceased,

emerges the thematic evaluation of the value of remembrances of the happy past where the dead still exist, which relates grief to the nostalgic conventions of the past .

Nostalgia also is seen from different points of view. John J. Su, for example, argues that nostalgic feelings work as a way to criticize undesirable present conditions. “Nostalgia, in other words, encourages an imaginative exploration of how present systems of social relations fail to address human needs” (5), and according to Su “the specific objects of nostalgia—lost or imagined homelands—represent efforts to articulate alternatives” (Su 5). For him, Nostalgia is a displacement; it relocates the central concentration from these unsatisfied needs to a point from the past where these needs seem to be acknowledged. By doing so, the person achieves a form of stability or an inner relief. Elsewhere, he reviews other critics who claim that nostalgia fixes the past, reforming it with a mix of fantasies that create a coherent story and offer a fixed view of the past. Correcting the errors of the original memories results in presenting a form of a utopian illusion about the past that has never existed and this is received disapprovingly by these critics. Su shows his disagreement to this opinion because, he sees that bridging the gaps of these memories reveals and acknowledges something about today’s troubles that stimulated the nostalgic feeling in the first place (9). Consequently, even though it creates an illusion about the past, nostalgia opens the door to see the reality of the present. Highlighting the nostalgic moments of the speaker in Dickman’s poetry is but one way of reading the present condition of grieving that stimulates the longing to the past.

-Contemporary poets-

The emerging form of continuous grieving distinguishes postmodern poetry. This phenomenon could be attributed to reading elegy as a text and not as a work. This kind of reading is proposed by Ashley David. In her work “a performance of theory, a performance of postmodern elegy, a performance of text,” she invites listeners to “co-create the experience” (Harriet Staff, 1). She presents a new way to evaluate the elegy as an interactive text. Building on Barthes’ theory that differentiates a dead work from a living text, she suggests that grieving is a feeling that involves the mourner, the mourned, and the reader in a continuous relation in which the text of elegy is edited and reread in a way that makes the elegy a renewing art, a continuity rather than just a work of mourning dwelling on the fixed content of the departed’s life (poetry Foundation). This reading justifies and manifests an emerging continuity, a performance of a literary expression of grief, exemplified by collective elegies. It is becoming a common thing for contemporary poets to lament their loved ones in a combination of poems shedding light on different aspects of memories with or about the deceased.

In her book of poems, *Elegy* (2005), Mary Jo Bang constructs a serial form of poems that are devoted to the loss of her son. As a postmodern elegy, it tends to be a continuous revelation of inner thoughts passed on through the pages without waiting for condolence and instead of a single epitaph that is said at the moment of the event in reaction to the tragedy. In a moment of self confrontation, Bang states that her book is

just an effortless attempt to both bring the deceased alive through memories and challenge herself to move forward. She writes:

This is the wilderness
Of evidence: a tangled thought
Becomes a book
On a dresser unread...
Pages stacked in predictable sequence:
Numbers behaving as numbers do,
Promising a future and
Lining up at the door and waiting
Patiently to enter (Evidence, 1-9).

She states that this book is a tangled thought; using the singular form for her ideas shows that it is a unified thought that is extended all through the poems. Flipping through the pages may give a false sense of moving forward, but the fact that the book is unattended is evidence of neglect, since it is left on *a dresser unread*, which means that it does not achieve the aim of putting a “death mask on a tragedy,” as she mentions in another poem. This collection stands for the idea of the open serial of expressions that emerges in moving from one poem to the other, within a unified thought but without a specific order, indifferent to the chronological arrangement of events. From her point of view, the role of these poems is identified in her poem “The Role of Elegy”:

The role of Elegy is
To put a death mask on a tragedy,

A drape on the mirror...
What is Elegy but the attempt
To rebreathe life
Into what the gone one once was. (1-6)

Confirming that elegy as a lament is but a mask for tragedy reveals her conception of the continuity of the agonies in her memory. It is a life, an existence that is marked by her poems. The same poems that should bid farewell and mourn the death are rebelling against it, by bringing the tragedy to life. She refuses the theme of death itself as a fact. In the same poem, she confesses that all her elegies are but an effort to grant a presence to the dead who is no longer there. In *Ghostly Matters*, Every Gordon puts the responsibility of the ghostly appearance on the ghost itself, as the ghost wants to be acknowledged. Gordon says that “haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence...the ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost or barely visible...makes itself known or apparent to us” (8). Bang, on the other hand, takes the responsibility of creating a presence for the deceased. She tries to reconstruct the appearance of the lost thing; in this case, it serves the need of the mourner to acknowledge the dead, rather than benefiting the dead from such representation. Bang describes the contradiction between an *absence* that she wants to fill with an imagined presence of the deceased and a *presence* of a tragedy that still exists and refuses to disappear from her mind in order to fade away like the dead.

-Matthew Dickman-

Dickman uses a confessional tone of writing that depends on simplicity of expressions. Sometimes, he adopts a surreal style of writing that captures humanistic moments of modern life combined with representations of American culture. According to the *Missouri Review*, “he describes his poems as free associative narrative”. He says about his creation of poetry, “When I write I think of the process as colorful building blocks. I begin with one small idea or word and build off of it...there is a harsh but sweet complexity in all of our lives, and I hope that in their best moments these poems deal with that” The work that I am studying is *Mayakovsky's Revolver*; in which he conveys these complexities through a confessional style that aims to find sweetness in spite of life's hardships and agonies. In his review of Dickman's work, Eric Stiefel states:

The poems in *Mayakovsky's Revolver* take place in quiet moments, the shadows of memories that can only exist in the world of poetry. The collection laments the death of a dead brother, while embracing the life of a twin brother, staring right into the smallest of moments, and, in spite of everything, managing to find great love and great loss.

The power of celebrating continuity despite grief attracts the attention of other poets as well. Major Jackson reviews Dickman as someone who “knows something about the sorrows of this world, it's a call for a kind of toughness of spirit and sensitivity that must go underground if one is to survive.”

The title of Dickman's collection is named after his Elegiac piece in which he refers to the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovski. In a similar manner to Esenin's tragic suicide, Mayakovski shoots himself with a gun, ending his life at an early age, which was a major loss for the Futurist movement of his time. The comparable death of the two Russian poets, along with the death of Dickman's brother, is probably the main reason for including them in his elegies. Ending their lives at a young age was a result of the social pressures on them. Both of them were attacked for their criticism of the political conditions, and neither could handle the critiques of their literary productions. By bringing them into his poems, Dickman may see in his brother a victim of society; blaming the social indifference for his departure, where his death goes unremembered, unlike himself, who continues the act of remembrance.

My analysis of Dickman's poetry will focus on grief and nostalgia. These two themes are not totally separate, but rather related to the same theme of remembrance, whether remembering the dead or longing for the past. The first leads to the second one, and the second emerges from the first. At the same time I will focus on the technique of embedded writing, showing how the poet takes advantage of this process to convey his thoughts. By understanding the power of writing as Dickman conceives it, one can comprehend what he is trying to do in the rest of the poems that do not have the internal written form. Reading these poems closely will show how each poem is integrated with a particular moment from the mourner's daily events, from which grief spontaneously arises.

Dickman projects his grieves in a poem that is titled after these feelings. The first poem of my discussion is “Grief,” from *All American Poems*, which begins with an amusing simile:

When grief comes to you as a purple gorilla
you must count yourself lucky.
You must offer her what’s left
of your dinner, the book you were trying to finish
you must put aside,
and make her a place to sit at the foot of your bed (Grief 1-5).

Dickman personalizes this feeling as an outside figure, but a familiar one, portrayed as a gorilla, yet in a funny way, a purple gorilla. This coloring encourages the reader to accept the image as a friendly comic creature, which results in coping with the idea of sorrow as a familiar one. Moreover, he suggests that it is a valuable visitor and that “you must count yourself lucky” (2) for having it around. This unthreatening comer visits him and makes the speaker recall the names of his loved ones who have died, as well as his living acquaintances. In this image, the personification of grief as a gorilla enables the speaker to reflect on the emotions that are aroused by his own memory; remembering the names of those people, mandated by an outside emotion that controls him, causes him to keep remembering them.

Later on, the speaker, who is considering reconciling with his grief, is faced by the intruder, who brings him back to the list of the dead. He says, “So I tell her/things are feeling romantic/she pulls another name, this time/from the dead...Romantic? She says/reading the name out loud, slowly”(35-41). There is a difference between the speaker’s expression and the gorilla’s answer. His expression “romantic” may reflect a desire or a romantic interaction with his grief. He finds pleasurable those “things” that intertwine with his sorrow. Conversely, the gorilla’s use of “Romantic” is different. The word is capitalized, which could be interpreted as a Romantic movement rather than romantic desires. Grief refuses to be romanticized, as if the poet is aware that his grief is not just an overflow of imagination that has no solid existence, but rather, is a reality with which he has to get involved, despite its bitterness. The gorilla, “his grief,” brings him back to the mournful reality of loss with a “parental” blaming voice, calling the name of a dead person. So, as if he is describing his consciousness of the responsibility of remembering these names that resulted in sadness, grief comes to his mind and recalls these names.

Writing becomes the medium of this process. Writing the names of the dead constitutes a physical representation of them, even though he tries to forget and move on. The feeling of grief makes him look back at the symbolized person, by writing his name, making the speaker live the mourning again. However, by revealing the impetus for his mourning as an outside source, he is giving up responsibility for his actions. Dickman imagines a creature that occupies his consciousness, writing through him by ordering him

to jot down the names of the people whom he misses. His mourning is preserved in the writing process; when he tries to forget, these written names remind him again of the reason he wrote them, circling him back to the same point of his first grief.

The names, divided into two piles, separate his feelings; on one hand, a hopeful reconnection with the living, on the other, a hopeless reunion with the dead. While the gorilla is reading the name of a dead person, he imagines the syllables incarnate the dead body, wrapping the bones with muscles and flesh. The memories return through the written name, yet his realization that they are just memories makes him blame the injustice of death. He wishes a name were on the pile of the names of the living. He wishes the dead were alive, in which case he could see his brother again, but death has taken him recklessly and carelessly. The embedded writing becomes the path to express his lost battle to overcome his grief.

- Grieving and Nostalgia-

Elegiac poetry as a performance of grieving coincides consistently with nostalgic conventions. Not all forms of nostalgia emerge from grief, but in any case of loss, grieving engages the mourner with remembrances. Therefore, nostalgic feelings rise impulsively to express the yearning for pleasurable memories from the past. Critics have defined the concept of nostalgia in different ways. The original Greek word, which meant sickness for home coming, has been redefined by Ralph Harper as a world that is “generative and requires the start of life all over again” (28). Instead of seeing nostalgia

as degenerative and demanding a return to a past existence, he conceives of it as a productive power. Also, he sees it as the cure for the depression of estrangement rather than being an innate sickness by itself. Fred Davis argues that it helps to “mute the negatives”; as he says, “nostalgia furthers the purpose of continuity of identity by reassuring the now self that it is ‘as it was then,’ deserving, qualified, and fully capable of surmounting the fears and uncertainties that lie ahead” (39). He conceives nostalgia as a healthy mechanism to cope with a new environment; it helps the person to adjust to the changes in his/her life. From another angle, he turns in his book’s introduction to researchers like Nawas and Plat, who claim that nostalgia involves “a denial of future” rather than an escape from the present (9). Nina Boym, on her side, divides nostalgia into a political, restorative kind that aims to restore the glory of the past nations and a reflexive kind whereby the person reflects nostalgia to the outside world (Nostalgia and its discontents, 2). Regardless of their different interpretations, authors agree on the way nostalgia works: Whatever is inducing it, it engages the person with memories from the past, adjusted or reconstructed with the aid of fantasy to add glamour to joyful memories, thus moving unbearable events to the corners away from the concentration of remembering. I turn now to examine nostalgic conventions in a non-elegiac lyric, and then compare how nostalgia works within the new elegiac verse.

The depiction of nostalgic fantasies takes an interesting path in “Dear Space.” In this poem, Dickman escapes his despair and loneliness by imagining the shape of space when it returns to its beginning. The poem starts with a closed space (the empty room)

and ends with the open field of grass. In parallel to this form, Dickman begins his nostalgia with watching classic episodes in the small space and ends up with reflecting it to the open space, addressed in a letter. In her essay “Nostalgia and Its Discontent,” Boym defines nostalgia as the desire both for places that have been visited and those have not been visited before (1). In a way, she asserts the rule of imagination in creating the longing for a place that has not been visited in a previous experience. Dickman creates a form of feeling that is willing to discover the return of the outside world to its beginning instead of his own self returning to the past.

The poem begins with a typical atmosphere that prepares the speaker to get immersed in his fantasy, the feelings of loneliness and desolation. It is the loneliness that Wordsworth described as the motivating power of his nostalgic remembrance. In “Tintern Abby,” Wordsworth portrays his recall of the beautiful landscapes he has visited, saying, “But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din/of towns and cities I have owned to them/in hours of weariness sensation sweet/felt in the blood and felt along the heart” (26–30). Similarly, Dickman asserts this sense of loneliness at the beginning of his poem by saying that the woman he loves left the room so that he “can be alone in the living room, alone/in the manic universe of August”(3-4). But, while Wordsworth admits his passion for a specific memory from his past, Dickman steps away from his interior memory and projects his nostalgic fantasies upon the outside world.

In the middle of his boring solitude, the speaker considers watching comedy shows. Interestingly, he mentions two shows that are considered classics in American

culture; he thinks that it is time for “reruns of the Donna Reed Show/or The Marx Brothers”(10-11). These programs are part of the cultural inheritance, which is nostalgic not only for the speaker, but also for a broad segment of the American population. The intention of replaying these shows marks the beginning of his nostalgic conditions. Afterward, he turns with his fantasy to the outside world. He says,

I would like to write. Dear Love.

Dear motherfucker. Dear heart.

Dear space, I want to write—

Dear space, I can't seem to live the way I should, without

Loneliness, without passing out, I keep wishing

I knew more about supernovas,

That I had some of your dark energy.

(Dear Space 40–46)

First, he unites his being with Space, by wishing to have its energy and its dark matter; then, he expresses longing to see the return of Space to its beginning. One reading of these lines could be his hopeless recognition that this return will not achieve anything significant, since he asks Space what would be accomplished by this return that “Hollywood hasn't already encoded onto a disk”(53). He displaces himself from the feeling of loneliness and estrangement, which he feels toward the woman whom he loves, to the spectacular image of the beginning of the world and its inventions. This escaping from reality ends by his realization that he gains nothing from such nostalgic fantasy. So,

he decides to change his place in the real world. He leaves his lonely room and goes out to sit on the grass, where the breeze and the shimmering of the stars kill his loneliness.

The letter to Space embodies the speaker's imaginary communications with Space and his return to his real life. At the beginning, as he thinks of writing, he plays with the notion of addressing the letter to different agents, both internal and external. First he says he wants to write "dear love"(40). Then he moves to an external addressee with "dear motherfucker"(41).then, returns to the internal "dear heart"(41), and finally, he decides that he will write to the outside world exemplified by Space. Through imagining writing as a medium for communication, he reflects his internal despairs to the outside world included in an imaginary letter. Stepping away from his interior being, he begins to interrogate Space about the experience of its beginning, in order to get a coherent version of the past. Despite its disputable scientific theories, the story of the beginning of the world is always positive; it moves toward expanding, and the preparation for the human beings to have a chance to begin a life in this world. Eventually, since writing a letter requires response, it becomes the perfect technique of expressing the disconnection between himself and his addressee. It leads him back to the real world, realizing that these agents won't reply to him, he stands up and takes a different action to surpass his loneliness.

Dickman's elegy "Dog" shares the nostalgic convention with "Dear Space", but the strategy in this poem reverses that found in "Dear Space". In "Dear Space," the

speaker escapes his loneliness by turning to the open space; by contrast, in “Dog” Dickman begins with the speaker expressing his desire to be alone. He turns away from the world into his closed space: “I am hiding from the stars tonight. I’ve pulled/ every blind and turned off/ all the lights but one which I named after you” (1-3). Here, Dickman entangles nostalgic feeling with elegiac verse. In this elegy, he embraces the limited space of his home, accepts his loneliness, and retreats to those memories of the past that recall a painful past. While the poem ends with the growls of the dog, an outside, auditory disruption symbolizing an end to his loneliness and breaking his nostalgic fantasies with abrupt return to the present, this poem also captures an exceptional moment of weakness that is surpassed by the speaker; he reveals depressing thoughts of suicide that he manages to overcome through a comparison between the nostalgic past and his present.

This poem is part of the serial set of elegies that highlights specific moments of the mourner’s life while he is trying to adapt to his loss; “Dog” portrays an irrational moment that the poet experiences. He first establishes a two-sided comparison: he compares his brother to a flooding light, and then he states that the universe is flooded with this very light; that is, his brother and the universe are one. This similitude marks the limitation of the universe for him at the moment of grief and at the same time the enlargement of his brother into the entire universe. Consequently, emerging from the memory of the brother, and being surrounded by his depressing mood, he moves into a

circle of a self struggle that he manages to overcome by preferring the rational choice of survival over the irrational thoughts of suicide.

There is a linear transition in the poem from memories of old images to more recent ones; the speaker begins with his dead brother's photos and ends up with a photo of his living beloved. Between these two pictures lies the undecided choice of life or death. The anxious state is hinted at when he points out that his brother had never worn a tuxedo. This observation indicates two things: first, he uncovers a detail that suggests his brother's unsophisticated life, since wearing tuxedo is often connected with partying, formality, or luxurious style of living; second, he indicates a different fate for himself by including a picture of himself wearing a tuxedo as if he tries to triumph over the sad memory of his brother. He recalls it as a pleasant picture of himself, happy and partying, he seems to offer it to justify a will to continuity of his being that emerges from the temptations of ending his life. In *Yarning for Yesterday*, Fred Davis says, "In the clash of continuities and discontinuities with which life confront us, nostalgia clearly attends more to pleas for continuity" (33). As a result, as Dickman's world gets smaller, he finally succeeds in finding a link to life and chooses to quench his suicidal thoughts.

The speaker begins with the decreased space and gradually the dimensions of his thoughts of time get smaller and smaller. First he thinks of long-term exhausting cares like cancer and money, and then he moves to closer ideas of his tooth which needs to be removed. Finally his thoughts become so contracted that his concerns are narrowed to a

sense of his surrounding at these particular moments. Only then, he discloses his desire to commit a suicide. The memories of his twin brother were mechanisms to cope with an apprehensive present, a present that participates in the articulation of this elegy, which distinguish it from other poems. In *Nostalgia and Identity*, Fred Davis states that “we quiet our fears of the abyss while bestowing an endearing luster on past selves that may not have seemed all lustrous at the time” (41). The speaker looks into a former state of his life, happy celebrating with his twin brother. He states that he keeps this photo so that he can look into his brother’s eyes and “know who I am” (16). Recalling these memories and looking through these pictures comes as a result of his present despair, which he escapes by his intention to be involved in the remembrance of his dead brother. The despair glorifies his dead brother’s memory and the happy nostalgic time with his twin. Later on he says,

... I don’t know
what to do with myself. I’ve written the word choose
on a piece of paper and taped it to a knife. Then I peeled it off
and taped it to a book about Yesenin. Finally
I took it and stuck it on the screen
Of my computer where there is a picture of Erika wearing the silver
Necklace I bought her (19-25).

Dickman’s conception of the meaning of *choice* includes a kind of *freedom*; his choice should liberate him from his despair. This is why he moves from despair to love. His choices begin to move from a dark thought of picking up a knife, to reading a work

about a Russian poet who committed suicide like his brother. This action is a step away from the direct desire to commit suicide represented by the knife. Afterwards, the moment ends with his choosing life over death, indicated by his looking at the picture of his beloved. This gradual transition in his choices confirms the theme of returning to reality. In the beginning, he states that he wants to hide from everything, because the real equals the despair and leads to the picking up of the knife, while moving toward the imaginary world of literature, and later on, meditating on the visual representation of his beloved brings comfort and balance to his unstable world.

The visual representation of the word ‘choose’ signifies its importance. He writes a poem about choices and highlights the available options. He signifies the action which these options demand by attaching the written “choose” to them. It is a matter of choice whether he gives up or continues. The written word amplifies rational thinking, and allows him to realize his ability to survive these sad moments. Putting the word in written form, in addition to his abstract thinking of it, reinforce its power. In a way he suggests that giving up is a choice or not comes as a result of a challenging life where free choices are missing.

-“Mayakosky’s Revolver” and the Human Value-

The central theme in this poem is the value of the departed human being. Mayakovski’s revolver becomes the materialistic evaluation of the significance of the deceased poet. Dickman perceives in it an absence of the real merits of human life; he

comments that the revolver is offered for *only* 50 thousand dollars. Dickman projects an ethical responsibility in remembering the dead, which is beyond the measurements of the materialistic value. In doing so, he challenges the psychological theories, which relate melancholy to self-egoism. Clifton Spargo poses the same question of reading mourning as an ethical response and not psychological one to the incident of death. Spargo says, “The pathos of elegiac rhetoric...may express a more fundamental ethical wish...Since death is the literal occasion of a failure in a relationship, the mourner would enact a fantasy of care in which grief functions as a belated act of protection, expressing an ethic exceeding self-concern” (24). Dickman asserts that he wishes he could replace the value of his brother for a materialistic thing, saying,

...Why didn't I

Think of that? Remove the socks from my dead brother's feet

And trade them in for a small bit

Of change, a ticket to a movie, something

With a receipt, proof I was busy living,

That I didn't stay all night weeping (13-18).

The memories of his brother are always on his mind, reflecting on everything around him. He relates the image of the kids with blackberries in their mouths to the ghosts of dead people. After stating that he keeps thinking about these ghostly appeals, he moves directly to the image of the ghost of his brother. The visualization of his brother crying, versus the indifference of the surroundings, signified by the loneliness and the coldness of the ice machine, marks the feelings of unjustness and the absence of

appreciation. He tries to compensate this missing value by commemorating his dead brother.

The imagery of the ghostly presence creates for the speaker a desire to be encompassed by himself as he says, “instead of the moon/ I’ve been falling for the lunar light pouring out of the plastic shell I plugged into the bathroom wall” (9-11). These lines are similar to the beginning lines of his poem “Dog”, where he runs from the stars, closes all the curtains, and leaves only one light on. The brightness of the moon being replaced by a small realm of light suggests the limiting of his optimism and the shortness of his sight, which leads him to imitate the prosecution of his brother. He reinvents the circumstances that led his brother to kill himself, which he eventually reveals by the last lines, disclosing his fantasy of articulating the real suicide through the fake shooting that he performs on himself with a gun made of paper. In the previous poems, Dickman uses visual representation of the word to convey illustrated images for the described incidents. In this poem, he uses the marker to draw a gun; he symbolizes his depressing drive for death by rigging this gun until his thoughts fade away and the paper gun is torn apart.

-From Blaming Death to Embracing It-

The poem “Cloud” is not included under the Elegiac section devoted to his brother because it actually honors the drive for death of his brother instead of lamenting his absence. This nostalgic text challenges the elegiac poems by embracing the fact of his brother’s departure. It begins with a nostalgic tone as he remembers his brother, but

thinking of his brother's miserable situation lying in a hospital makes the poet see comfort in death. A cloud defers in signification in Dickman's terms. In this poem, it refers to a state of transparency of the dead human being. He describes the person who is dying in a hospital as if he is "clouding up"(29). He also compares clouds to a fatal thought of death through committing suicide, as he says that a cloud is following him with a razor, but above all, looking at the cloud reminds him of his brother. This poem begins by saying:

I found a white piece of paper
with your name on it
your old phone number written in the dark
loop of your handwriting.
I was standing outside a restaurant
watching this one cloud
float by like foam on a pint of beer
and thinking about how good
you've become at not being here anymore, how you
finally broke
like a storm across the sky of everything. (Cloud 1-11)

This poem is a type of meditation on an undecided state of being. The speaker is driven by the wish to kill himself. Unlike the Shakespearian conception of a struggling identity between two forms of action, where the state of being depends on them, the speaker in "Cloud" is partially tempted to conceive goodness in death and in moving

towards ending his own being. He addresses his departed brother with admiration for his new state—“being dead”; the speaker asserts this concept as he commends the goodness at not being in this world any longer. The words “finally broke”(10) stand by themselves on a separate line to highlight passing away as an achievement. The desire to commit suicide in this work is portrayed by the cloud that follows the speaker with a razor in its pocket. In the following lines, he responds to the question—if he was to be someone else whom would it be—and his answer is, “I thought of you/ lost in a sheet” (26). This answer has two clear indications. First, it portrays the addressee as his idol, his admirer, which explains why he would follow his example and think about suicide. Second, it might also indicate the pain he felt toward his brother’s condition and his wish to replace him. In both cases, it leads him to believe that *not being in this world* is a better state of being.

The reflections on the incidents of his brother’s death are activated by the coincidence of finding his name on a paper. It stimulates memories of what he was and how he ends up being. The dark loop of the hand writing serves as a portrayal for the brother’s former state. The image of the dark circles stands for a form of life that was surrounded by troubles, which he managed finally to escape by ending his life. The new state is highlighted by the poet as “Finally broke into the sky of everything”(10). The older situation is characterized by the darkness and the limitation of options. Conversely the new situation is described as better for “not staying in this world”. It is in the written name that he embedded his notes about his brother in this poem.

-Notes / Elegies-

In conclusion I turn to “Elegy to a Goldfish,” its humorous title distinguishes the poem from the rest of the elegiac poems by acknowledging the death of a pet instead of a human being. The part of Dickman’s elegiac section to his brother is defined as “Notes Passed to his Brother on the Occasion of His Funeral” (p29), and yet none of these elegies has the word elegy in their title. This could indicate the continuity of the presence of his brother in his mind; he addresses him, saying that the notes are written *to* his brother and not *about* him. Writing notes has the implication of conveying personal reflections toward an issue, or giving a testimony about a certain event. It includes a message that is being passed to a specific addressee or to the reader of these notes; and the writer of the notes serves as a witness. Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, for example, expresses his protagonist’s opinions toward the social conditions of the times. However, on his side, Dostoyevsky focuses on the source of these notes. He states that it comes *from* underground, because he aims to express that these notes come from the unheard and marginalized voices in a dominating society. Dickman on the other side, Highlights the addressee of his notes. By addressing it *to* his brother, he reinforces the connection to the absent brother, and the continuity of this relation through reflecting his memories to the deceased. In declining to use the word elegy in this section, Dickman departs from the traditional remembrance of lamenting the dead. He identifies his poetic revelations as notes written at the occasion of the funeral, as if he separates the formal ceremony and its rituals of the body’s burial from the continuous form of

commemoration represented by remembering and the documented reflections about his past life with the deceased through notes written to him.

Conversely, the goldfish is addressed with a realization of its fatal end; expressed by the word 'Elegy' in its title. Dickman uses this death to recall the story of a childhood adventure about chasing the little fish in an effort to create a moment of joy in the middle of the dreadful conditions, which he symbolizes with the gloomy winter season. The speaker puts two themes of death in confrontation with each other—the physical death versus the death of hope or a promising future. In addition, the poem is written in a confessional tone in which he relates a current aspect of his character to this past experience as he says, when considering squeezing the fish, “now that is something/ I get to have forever” (21-22). He tries to overcome a feeling of guilt by justifying the reason for coming up with this idea, of killing the fish, which he claims to be the boring circumstances around him.

Time is not specified in the poem but the event is recalled in detail. This neglect of time marginalizes the length of time that has passed and emphasizes the living experience in his memory. The first line begins with the uncertainty of time, “I can't remember when,” (page 60). but the details are narrated with accurate details as he moves from the actual killing to the spiritual death of hope in his sister's eyes as she looks at the empty bowl. Dickman uses an approach in remembering that depends frequently on neglecting memories of exact times and rather is concerned with the occurrences that

occupy his memory. In separate lines of the poem, he repeatedly says, “it might have been me” (10) who did this or that, and this uncertainty keeps the focus on what is happening. In several poems, he recited a particular event that starts by denying memories of things that distract him from the actual incident. In “Blue Sky” for example, he begins by saying, “I don’t know if it matters that I don’t remember her name” (line 1), however, he moves on to elucidate his relation to the recalled woman in a way that seems to indicate accuracy. This concern with the event itself revolts against the linearity of time by bringing to the present precise snapshots of the past, involving the reader in the rhetorical hints behind what is said rather than getting distracted by other layers of the process of remembering.

The event recalled in this poem emerges from situating two worlds next to each other that are contradictory —the small world of the fish in her bowl and the big world outside. On the one hand, the fish is imagined as *happy* and *bright*, living in the clean bowl of her life. On the other hand, the portrayal of nature outside and the dreadful winter as being full of death is dark; depressing verbs describes the action, as *starving*, *burning*, and *knocking*. Those two worlds melt into each other as the death outside is reflected on the inside, killing the fish, gains temporary childish happiness. Nevertheless, there is a confessional moment where he admits holding something that moment grew inside him as he grew up. After stepping on the fish, he says, “now that is something I get to have forever. That Halloween-candy/ sized rage, that cough drop/of meanness. And your death, only the beginning” (21-24). In his interview with Tim Greenup for the Willow

Springs, Dickman says about his collection, “I’m delving into a place I never went to in *All-American Poem*, which is this idea of the Shadow—the Shadow being, obviously, the shadowy, darker part of ourselves” (10). This revelation explains his flood of memories that makes the unseen presence of his inner being palpable to the reader.

It is through this process of the embodiment of the shadow that he constructs the fake appearances of happiness. He refers to the contentment of the fish in its fake castle and soon afterwards, states that it fell from the wallpaper of the English gardens, which make his own place constructed of fakeness too, symbolized by the fake English gardens. He finishes the poem by addressing the importance of the fish as a source of fake comfort; the cheerfulness it brings to his little sister is compared to a “tiny Christ”(53), which complicates the theme of fake appearances as it turns against our beliefs and ideologies of a promised happiness in the future.

The main purpose of this poem is an elegy to his childhood and the conditions that forced him to live in a fake happiness. He has an understanding of the hardships in the outside world. The speaker reveals a feeling that is bizarre for small boys to experience when he states that part of him was aware of the death outside. He concludes the poem, calling the fish a machine of hope, saying,

And in every country

Countless deaths, but none as important

As yours, tiny Christ, machine of hope, martyr of girls and boys (51-53).

This last elegy takes a new stream in exposing something that is totally beyond the experience of death. It foretells of a chance to proclaim a memory of a certain story from his childhood where he created a moment of joy in the middle of the depressing surroundings of winter.

-Conclusion-

The heart of my work was to provide an example of the new stream of elegies that departs from the traditional aspects of elegy, by pointing out the significant mark that distinguishes each poem from the rest. The traditional form can be expressed simply in three sentences: (I can't believe you are gone, you were such a good person, I will never forget you). Thus, it begins with denial of the death event, and then it elaborates the cherished merits of the deceased, eventually ending with promising the dead that he will not be forgotten. The contemporary elegies, on the other hand, act as if death is an unforgettable event. They adopt the third part of the traditional poem as a trope to embody the continuity of remembering. Instead of being directed to the dead, they follow the life of the mourner, commenting on specific moments in his life, and through these moments, grief appears forcefully as a continuous feeling that connects the memory of the mourner to the mourned. Reading these poems as texts and not as works of art invites the reader to participate in editing his own conception of grievances, resulting in changing the theme of elegy as a solo performance over a personal grief into a collective performance that preoccupies the memory of the living, which achieves the ethical value of commemorating the loss.

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APPENDIX
DICKMAN'S POEMS

***Grief**

*When grief comes to you as a purple gorilla
you must count yourself lucky.
You must offer her what's left
of your dinner, the book you were trying to finish
you must put aside,
and make her a place to sit at the foot of your bed,
her eyes moving from the clock
to the television and back again.
I am not afraid. She has been here before
and now I can recognize her gait
as she approaches the house.
Some nights, when I know she's coming,
I unlock the door, lie down on my back,
and count her steps
from the street to the porch.
Tonight she brings a pencil and a ream of paper,
tells me to write down*

*everyone I have ever known,
and we separate them between the living and the dead
so she can pick each name at random.
I play her favorite Willie Nelson album
because she misses Texas
but I don't ask why.
She hums a little,
the way my brother does when he gardens.
We sit for an hour
while she tells me how unreasonable I've been,
crying in the checkout line,
refusing to eat, refusing to shower,
all the smoking and all the drinking.
Eventually she puts one of her heavy
purple arms around me, leans
her head against mine,
and all of a sudden things are feeling romantic.
So I tell her,
things are feeling romantic.
She pulls another name, this time
from the dead,
and turns to me in that way that parents do*

so you feel embarrassed or ashamed of something.

Romantic? she says,

reading the name out loud, slowly,

so I am aware of each syllable, each vowel

wrapping around the bones like new muscle,

the sound of that person's body

and how reckless it is,

how careless that his name is in one pile and not the other

***Dear Space**

The woman I love has gone

to bed early

so I can be alone in the living room, alone

in the manic universe of August,

just me arranging

and rearranging the books like someone

packing and repacking their parachute

only I'm not jumping, only maybe the books are not

what's saving me anymore. Maybe now

it's reruns of The Donna Reed Show

or the Marx Brothers

or movies about people who are funny

all the time. I keep watching the same rap

video on YouTube

about the stacks of money

and what's going to happen. Outside

It has just begun to cool down

So I can take a walk if I want, see if there's a moon

Somewhere above the movie theater,

Some summer stars

Up there, some planet to go with the grass I'll lie on

Next to the school, a big field

Where someone is a sleep

Or passed out, where a dog

Overcomes a dead bird,

Just hlf a bird now

But real in the cool dark green, motionless

*At the foot of the chain- link
Fence, if I were to go out
And find that bird I would want to sit down next to it
And give it a name. I would want to gather up
Some sticks and make a house
For it to live in while it's being dead.
I would want to sit there
All night and that's why I'm only going to open
A window, open all my widows, so if it wants it can
Come here and fall asleep in my lap. I'm sitting
In the middle of the room
With a blanket over my head and some letters
I would like to write. Dear love.
Dear motherfucker. Dear heart.
Dear space, I want to write-
Dear space, I can't seem to live the way I should, without
Loneliness, without passing out, I keep wishing
I knew more about supernovas,
That I had some of your dark energy,
your dark matter, I wonder
if you're expanding or cooling or what
it will look like
when you turn back to your own beginning
what fire, what ice,
what you will invent out there
that Hollywood hasn't already encoded into a disk,
already built in a garage
off sunset. But space will never
write back. Neither will love
or real motherfuckers. So I should just stand up, grab my shoes,
walk to the field and sit down
in the grass. I wouldn't be alone. A small breeze
making her wings lift, some starlight through a pine making her
shimmer.*

***Dog**

*I'm hiding from the stars tonight. I've pulled
every blind and turned off
all the lights but one, which I've named after you,
which I can see flooding the dark
hallway of my high school when I open the locker
with your name on it, the only one*

left, the universe flooding out
onto the floor. *I thought maybe I would find
a note from you
and that's why I dreamt about it. In all the pictures
I've seen of my older brother
he is never wearing a tuxedo. But I have one, bent at the edges,
of me and my twin on a boat, on prom night, happy,
already a little drunk. I carry this picture whenever I fly
so I can look at it right before the crash, below the screams
and the smell of urine, I can look into his eyes
and know who I am. All night I've been worrying
about money and cancer and the tooth
I have to get pulled out before it poisons me. I can smell
the lemon I cut earlier for the carrots and fish. I don't know
what to do with myself. I've written the word choose
on a piece of paper and taped it to a knife. Then I peeled it off
and taped it to a book about Yesennin. Finally
I took it and stuck it on the screen
of my computer where there is a picture of Erika wearing the silver
necklace I bought her. Outside a dog is sitting in the yard
looking up at the porch. Every once in a while
it wags its tail and whines, then it's quiet, and then it begins to
growl.*

***Mayakovsky's Revolver**

*I keep thinking about the way
blackberries will make the mouth
of an eight-year-old look like he's a ghost
that's been shot in the face. In the dark I can see
my older brother walking through the tall brush
of his brain. I can see him standing
in the lobby of the hotel,
alone, crying along with the ice machine.
Instead of the moon
I've been falling for the lunar light pouring out of a plastic shell
I've plugged into the bathroom wall. Online
someone is claiming to own Mayakovsky's revolver
which they will sell for only fifty thousand dollars. Why didn't I
think of that? Remove the socks from my dead brother's feet
and trade them in for a small bit
of change, a ticket to a movie, something
with a receipt, proof I was busy living,
that I didn't stay in all night weeping,
that I didn't stay up*

*drawing a gun over and over
with a black marker, that I didn't cut
out the best one, or stand
in front of the mirror, pulling the paper trigger until it tore away.*

***Cloud**

*I found a white piece of paper
with your name on it
your old phone number written in the dark
loop of your handwriting.
I was standing outside a restaurant
watching this one cloud
float by like foam on a pint of beer
and thinking about how good
you've become at not being here anymore, how you
finally broke
like a storm across the sky of everything. The clouds are not moving*

In slow motion. In fact the clouds are very fast

And have somewhere to go,

Some tornado or other to take care of, to urge on.

This cloud is a rain cloud with a razor

In its pocket. It has followed me around all day

and all day clouds rose above my head and disappeared,

as I lit and relit a cigarette. The smoke

looked like the blue eyes of a fish. A metal

blue ruining the sky, I remember

lying down on the roof of the Portlandia Building,

my high school girlfriend

throwing pennies off the side because she heard somewhere

it could kill a person

if it fell far enough and asking me if I could be anyone, who would

I be?

I thought of you, lost in a sheet

Somewhere, the nurse in her white arch supports,

The trees outside your window making hay

With the sky, your body clouding up, your medication floating off

Into a field somewhere full of caws

With eyes and brains and the slow life

I imagine God enjoys

Because when it comes to God his hospital is a field, his

imagination a bovine.

***Elegy to a Goldfish**

I can't remember when

My brother and I decided to kill you, small

Fish with no school, bright and happy at the bottom,

Slipping through the gate

Of your fake castle. I think it was winter. A part of us

Aware of the death outside, the leaves

Being burned up and the squirrels starving

Inside the oaks, the sky

Knocking its clouds into the ashtray of the city.

*And it might have been me
Who picked you up first, who
Chased you around the clean bowl of your life
And brought you up into the suffocating
Elevator of ours. And I want to say it was my brother
Who threw you against the wall
Like a drunk husband, the glow-worm inch of you
Sliding down the English garden
Of wallpaper, and that it was me who raised my leg
Like a dog, me who brought my bare foot
Slamming down on your almost nothing ribs,
And felt you smear like a pimple. Now that's something
I get to have forever. That Halloween-candy-
Sized rage, that cough drop
Of meanness. And your death, only
The beginning, the mushy orange autopsy
Reminded us of mandarins, Navels, Bloods, Persians,
The sweet Valencia. And when our sister,
Who must have thought of you all day
Came home to find the bowl
Empty, looked at us, my brother and me,
I remember we started to laugh. And then*

*It might have been me,
Though it could have been him, who thought to open
The can of tangerines, who pulled
One of the orange bodies out of the syrup, and threw it at her,
This new artificial you, chasing her around the house
Screaming Eat him! Eat him!
But it was me who held her down on her bed
And him who forced
Her mouth open, and it was me who pushed
The sticky fruit into her throat
Like a bloody foot
Into a sock. You had only been gone for one hour
And yet the sky outside turned black and red, the tree in the yard thrashed back
And forth until its spinal cord
Broke, and my little sister, your one love, flashed white
And pulsed like a neon
In a hospital, her eyes
Rolloing back into the aquarium of her head
For a moment, and in every country
Countless deaths, but none as important
As yours, tiny Christ, machine of hope, martyr of girls and boys*