TODD F. DAVIS AND KENNETH WOMACK

Reading the Ethics of Mourning in the Poetry of Donald Hall

IN HIS THIRTEENTH BOOK OF POETRY, *Without* (1998), Donald Hall offers a series of poems that memorialize his marital life with the celebrated poet Jane Kenyon as she struggles with, and ultimately succumbs to, leukemia.[1] In addition to chronicling the nature and profundity of his grief, Hall's collection of poetry affords him a means for telling and retelling the stories of his final months with Kenyon. From such poems as "The Gallery," in which Hall reproduces the local headline announcing her death in April 1995—"POET JANE KENYON DIES / AT HER HOME IN WILMOT" (48)—to "Without," in which he laments the "hours days weeks months weeks days hours" that pass swiftly by "without punctuation" in his grief and isolation (46), the obviously cathartic aspects of this process provide Hall with an avenue for narrating his grief and contextualizing the breach in his life engendered by Kenyon's glaring and painful absence. Using recent insights in family systems psychotherapy and ethical criticism, we will explore the manner in which Hall employs *Without* as an explicit forum for both embracing and transcending the barriers of time and death. As we witness Hall's struggle to transform his grief into a narrative of mourning that might hold together the reality of his loss within the context of art, the power of narrative therapy—one of the principal means of treatment in contemporary family systems psychotherapy, as well as a valuable and illuminating form of literary critique—emerges as the principal means of coping for Hall. Because Hall devotes particular energy in his verse to not only narrating but also recontextualizing his grief and anger over Kenyon's untimely—and indeed, very public—loss, we will construct an ethics of mourning in this essay in order to confront the important, and often unexamined, work of narrative therapy in literary works of art and its significant role in the grieving process for both the writer and his audience.

In *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (1990), Michael White and David Epston augment the tenets of the family systems paradigm to account for the ways in which narrative experiences provide readers with a means for interpersonal development and growth. As White and Epston note, "In order to perceive change in one's life—to experience one's life as progressing—and in order to perceive oneself changing one's life, a person requires mechanisms that assist her to plot the events of her life within the context of coherent sequences across time—through the past, present, and future" (35). These mechanisms—works of narrative therapy—offer cogent methodologies that assist clients (or readers and writers) in simultaneously identifying with and separating from the dilemmas that plague their lived experiences. Therapists such as White and Epston argue that the externalization of interpersonal problems through narrative therapy enables these readers and writers to address their various issues via the liberating auspices of the imagination. Such stories encourage them "to explore possibilities for establishing the conditions that might facilitate performance and circulation of their preferred stories and knowledges" (76). In short, the telling and retelling of story furnishes readers and writers with the capacity for transforming their lives through the therapeutic interpretation of their textual experiences.[2]

An ethics of mourning challenges us to account for the ways in which we go about the business of mourning, a largely uncharted territory in contemporary ethical criticism's growing body of scholarship.[3] As a composer of elegies throughout his long and distinguished career, Hall possesses a special knowledge of the manner in which we communicate and memorialize loss. Yet as Alice Attie notes, contemporary poets such as Hall often seize the emotional brutality of death, and, in sharp contrast with their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century precursors, eschew the clichés of mourning and commemoration in favour of the more explicit embrace of their personal desolation. "The modern elegy," Attie observes, "often attempts to be painfully close to the loss it mourns. The absence of traditional consoling clichés becomes, in itself, an interrogation both of the arrogance of attempting to speak at all and of the compromise involved in hiding behind the consoling fictions" (no). In a perceptive essay on the loss of his father and his own deferral of mourning, Geoffrey Gait Harpham describes our various clichés for grieving, including the time-honoured phrases for discussing the ways in which we "got on with it," "took care of business," and "handled the situation" (541). While such homilies equip us with a means for communicating our dignity and resolve in the face of human loss, they scarcely provide us with healing methodologies for confronting—and ultimately transcending—the mourning of our loved ones. "Where do tears go when they don't flow out?" Harpham astutely asks. "Do they just circulate around in you? Do you sweat them out?" (544).

As a form of narrative therapy, an ethics of mourning reflects the struggle each human faces with the death of an other: the reality of our own mortality, the finality that we discover in our loved ones' deaths. As a poet, Hall addresses this inevitability by looking backward, by elegizing not only the person that he mourns but also the events and places that shaped his experiences of that person. An ethics of mourning begins and ends with a recognition that while every moment passes from us in an infinite procession that denies our desire to return to a place or person in the past, we may still find some solace in the balm that language affords as a means to build a bridge across time's expanse in order to testify to the strength of love, even within the desolation of loss. As an act of literary interpretation, an ethics of mourning cultivates empathy in the reader. Without the ability to assume the role of the characters who grieve within the confines of the story or poem, the reader will not be transformed. As an ethical paradigm, the act of mourning encourages the reader to take part in the grieving that the writer records, to experience the death of a person whom we have never known, except through the artifice of language. Similar to the suspension of disbelief, an ethics of mourning draws us into the circle of grief so we may shed tears that are at once our own and not our own. Within this act of textual grieving, an ethics of mourning implores us to recognize how our own lives—and their inescapable endings—are tied inextricably to the lives and deaths of others.

In *Without*, Hall's postulation of an ethics of mourning allows him to utilize his elegies as forums for encountering, in all of its brute narrative force, the pain of Kenyon's suffering and absence. By concentrating on the particularities of Kenyon's existence and their relationship in his verse, Hall's ethics of mourning functions as a means for progressing from the sorrowful explication of her death to the healing power of her memory. The act of grieving leaves us "without force," Jacques Derrida writes in his essay

"By Force of Mourning," or that "state of being drained, without any force, where death, where the death of a friend, leaves us, when we also have to work at mourning" (174). Rather than merely console himself with hazy recollections of a healthy Kenyon, however, Hall forces himself to "work" on his grieving in Without, and, in so doing, compels himself to examine the depths of his mourning for Kenyon through his careful depiction of the bittersweet nuances of their final days together, as well as the awful emptiness of the "hours days weeks months weeks days hours" that transpired after her death. Hall's ethics of mourning in Without functions as a form of narrative therapy that not only allows him to immerse himself in the pain ofKenyon's passing, but also to celebrate the simple majesty—the "ordinary pleasures" and "contentment recollected," he writes in "Weeds and Peonies" (81)—of her former existence.

Hall uses poetry throughout his career as a medium for understanding our impending mortality, a space in which at times he can rage against the uncontrollable forces of life and death. Yet Hall's poetry is not one of futility; while he may not be able to control the forces that inevitably and ultimately end our lives, he does, at other times, suggest a kind of peace that might be discovered by coming to a deeper understanding and acceptance of the act of dying. Hall's writing activities establish an ethics of mourning that demands that our stories of grief be told and retold. A collection such as *Without* offers a model of the manner in which we may face the looming absence that invariably follows the death of a loved one. Hall's poems demonstrate that the survivors of the deceased can only reshape their own lives by telling stories of their shared past, as well as stories of a future they must face without the one they have lost.

By naming our experiences, we begin not only to understand them but to transform them into stories of coping and of healing. In *The One Day* (1988), a book-length poem whose working title was, tellingly, *Building the House of Dying* and for which he received the National Book Critics Circle Award, Hall confronts the pain endemic to grief and mourning. In his writing of that book, Hall contends that the process of mourning itself functions as an imaginative act:[4]

> The bed is a world of pain and the repeated deaths of
> preparation for death. The awake nightmare
> comforts itself by painting the mourner's portrait:
> As I imagine myself on grief's rack at graveside I
> picture and pity myself. When pathology supplies
> the jargon of reassurance, I have buried your body a
> thousand times. (60)

Only in understanding the death of another do we begin to comprehend our own mortality, and only through such an understanding can we begin to enter into the ethical act of grieving the loss of another. In *Tales and Transformations: Stories in Families and Family Therapy* (1994), Janine Roberts relates the experience of Katie, an eight-year-old girl who confronts death for the first time; subsequently, Katie names her initiation into the knowledge of life and death in a rather straightforward, laconic manner, calling the moment, "When I First Really Learned About Death" (46-47). Katie's experience demonstrates powerfully the efficacy of placing our pain or fear into language. By using language to describe our struggle with the knowledge of death, we wrest the power of grief away from the physical absence of the one we loved, and in so doing we become empowered to reconstruct our present reality in such a way that it may account for our loss without obliterating the continued healing presence of memory.

In the title poem of *The Old Life* (1996), Hall's own initial encounter with death mirrors Katie's experience as she names her fear and grief. At the age of nine, after the death of his great-aunt Jennie, Hall lay awake,

> repeating a sentence over and over
> in my head: It was as if
> I had read it in a book: "When
> he was only nine
> years old, 'Death became a reality.'" (32)

This reality haunts much of Hall's work. Hall appears to be nearly prescient, moreover, about the deaths that will come. In *The Museum of Clear Ideas* (1993), he writes of Henry King, a man who has lost a young wife and whom Hall implores to "teach us / to grieve with gratitude" as we explore "grief's borders, boundaries of mourning / and lamentation, wild cries and unending tears, / when the unexpected and unacceptable / death happens" (78).

Although he wrote these lines many years before Kenyon's death, Hall already recognizes in the stories of others the grief that borders all existence, that intrudes into the very centre of every life at some point. Long before the personal struggle that serves as the impetus for *Without*, Hall establishes a central tenet for an ethics of mourning: empathy must preside over our grief, helping us to comprehend how our own lives end in certain irrevocable ways with the death of another.

In *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (1982), Robert Kegan describes the human condition as one that demands "making meaning" out of those events that we face daily. In confronting death and the ensuing loss, however, Kegan asserts that our ability to make meaning may be compromised in some fashion by the apparent finality of the event. The crisis prompted by the devastating loss of a loved one, for example, may actually create a powerful disassociation in the person who grieves such a loss. "One is unable to re-cognize, or re-know, oneself and one's world," Kegan explains. "One experiences, even literally, being beside oneself" (265). Hall demonstrates this kind of disassociation through the rhetorical structures he chooses to use in composing *Without*. Hall's volume consists of a variety of shorter poems interspersed with the extended narrative poem, Her Long Illness, which serves as the unifying structure for much of the collection. Hall shifts from the first to the third person throughout the volume, speaking of himself exclusively in the third person in *Her Long Illness* and adopting the first person in the majority of the other poems. In this manner, Hall the poet and Hall the grieving husband who "acts" within the margins of the poem effect a kind of narrative separation. Hall achieves distance by using the third person, and that distance enables him to examine his own complex and, at times, contradictory reaction to the trauma of Kenyon's battle with leukemia. In the text of the poem, Hall stands beside himself—the husband who has lost his wife and who now writes the story of that loss, alongside the husband who still cares for his dying wife and who struggles in the midst of her efforts to live. Hall gains emotional strength via this dual perspective in order to work through the grief that consumes him, the despair that threatens to rend him from his future life.

In the course of *Her Long Illness*, Hall meticulously describes the progress of the disease, its treatment, and the toll that it takes on both Kenyon and himself. With the precision of a documentary filmmaker, he stands behind the camera of his poetic lens and allows it to record objectively what plays out within the purview of the frame. The "I" that speaks elsewhere in the volume, often confessing the most intimate of details, becomes subordinate to the "he" who "drank coffee and read / the *Globe*," who "paced" and "worked on / poems...rubbed her back / and read aloud" while "chemotherapy dripped / through the catheter into her heart" (i). Such a means of seeing—at least within the world of the poem—bestows Hall with a range beyond his own limited vision in the physical world beyond the text. Like a novelist, he enters the lives of his characters, taking on their joy and their pain, their love and their sorrow. Through the act of writing, he becomes an omniscient observer, a witness once removed from the crisis that in the past threatened to engulf him. Now, through the therapeutic practice of creating a narrative—a process that demands precision, the culling of exact detail from the morass of potential events left in the wake of grief—he enters into a kind of covenant with his sorrow.[5]

Such narrative techniques allow Hall both to punctuate the helplessness he felt as Kenyon's body wasted away under the onslaught of chemotherapy and to assault the irony of the chilling technology used to combat the disease:

> As they killed her bone
> marrow again, she lay on a gurney
> alone in a leaden
> room between machines that resembled
> pot-bellied stoves
> which spewed out Total Body Irradiation
> for eleven half-hour
> sessions measured over four days.
> It was as if she capped
> the Chernobyl pile with her body. (20)

With a detachment that renders his story more poignant, the controlled, even tone of Hall's voice indicates the remembered agony of the event, while suggesting the accuracy of his observations. Behind the factual, dispassionate prose he uses to report the medicines that Kenyon must consume—"He counted out meds / and programmed pumps to deliver / hydration, TPN,

and ganciclovir" (24)—we witness the barely controlled grief that encircles his life, that pushes him toward desperation. Twice in the course of the volume Hall confesses that he considers suicide: first, while caring for Kenyon in Seattle—"Waiting for the light / to cross the avenue, briefly he imagined / throwing himself in front / of that bus" (23)—and later, in a letter to his dead wife,

> I daydreamed burning the house:
> kerosene in pie plates
> with a candle lit in the middle.
> I locked myself in your study
> with Gus, Ada, and the rifle
> my father gave me at twelve.
> I killed our cat and our dog.
> I swallowed a bottle of pills,
> knowing that if I woke on fire
> I had the gun. (78)

Hall's ethics of mourning demands that he candidly recount his trial of grieving. He must not—and, indeed, cannot—polish the memory of Kenyon's slow deterioration with the glossy oil of sentimentality, nor can he manipulate the rhetoric of superficial courage or unfeeling stoicism in order to present himself as untouched by the hand of extinction. Hall's ethics of mourning obliges him, moreover, to reveal the very aspects of death that he has been taught to conceal by a culture that has banished the act of dying out of our homes and into the fluorescent glare of hospital rooms and the hushed quiet of funeral parlours.[6] Hall refuses to hide his grief from others, just as Kenyon refuses to die in a hospital. Instead, as he recounts in "Last Days," Hall brings Kenyon home and stays by her side until he "watched her chest go still. / With his thumb he closed her round brown eyes" (45).

Distressing and unsettling, the revelation that Hall considered suicide, even momentarily, or that he smelled the "sharp, almost sweet / smell" which "began to rise from her open mouth" (45) just before Kenyon's death, underscores the importance of narrative therapy as a tool for examining oneself and later shaping one's identity. In this case, Hall actually remembered lines from Kenyon's poem, "Gettysburg: July i, 1863," as

Kenyon expired, and later used her very words to shape this experience in his own work. As Hall explains in a letter, "I smelled the smell that she spoke of. She had not only been with her father at the moment when he died, but she was also a hospice worker. When I smelled that smell, I remembered her poem" (Letter to Todd Davis). By structuring our experience, the narratives of others coalesce with our own narratives, giving them shape and form. "The recognition that humans use narrative structure as a way to organize the events of their lives and to provide a scheme for their own self-identity," Donald E. Polkinghorne explains in *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (1988), "is of importance for the practice of psychotherapy and for personal change" (178). *Without* appears to serve both as a testament to the validity of narrative therapy and as a way for Hall to engage in positive personal change as he experiences the act of mourning and its considerable ethical import. An elegy for Kenyon, *Without* functions as a vehicle for Hall to express not only his grief but his love for the person with whom he has shared his life for twenty-two years. In a particularly moving passage from "A Long Illness," Hall relates the "celebration" of their twenty-second wedding anniversary:

> He gave her a ring
> of pink tourmaline
> with nine small diamonds around it.
> She put it on her finger
> and immediately named it Please Don't Die.
> They kissed and Jane
> whispered, "Timor mortis conturbat me." (9)

In many instances, Robert Coles contends, "Death is our problem; for the one in the hospital bed, death has already come and gone, regardless of the presence of a pulse, a heartbeat, and a normal electroencephalogram" (167). Yet in Kenyon and Hall's case, the fear of death confounds both the dying and the living. As Kenyon herself remarks later in Hall's "Last Days," "Dying is simple. What's worst is...*the separation*" (42). Her words make explicit reference to the ending of Hall's previous collection, *The Old Life* (1996), in which, having been given the news that Kenyon has contracted leukemia, Hall makes "a slip / of the tongue: 'My life has leukemia'" (123).

After more than two decades with Kenyon, Hall can imagine no other life beyond the boundaries of his experiences with her at Eagle Pond Farm. The rhythms of his workday are filled with the presence of his spouse. With separation as an impending reality, dread overtakes Hall and forces him to regress: "Inside him, / some four-year-old / understood that if he was good—thoughtful, / considerate, beyond / reproach, *perfect*—she would not leave him" (13). Hall's "life" truly has leukemia, and it threatens his existence as poet and as husband. As with many poets of his generation, the borders in Hall's life between his personal and professional existence seem porous at best; no clear line signifies the boundary where one ends and the other begins. Instead, Hall writes about his life in his poetry and lives much of his life while he writes.[7] The world of his text—where Kenyon appears so often and where Hall and his neighbours and relatives muster the strength to make do for another day—becomes mortally threatened by the debilitating effects of leukemia and the loss that it portends.

In one sense, then, the ethics of mourning that Hall maps in the composition of Without determines the shape of the poetry itself. The threat of extinction that confronts Hall with the news that Kenyon's leukemia has become terminal forces him to face what Therese A. Rando, in *Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Loue Dies*, describes as the imminent loss of "the hopes, dreams, wishes, fantasies, unfulfilled expectations, feelings, and needs you had for and with that person" (17). Because Hall spends no time creating other narratives of his life that do not include Kenyon—both poets in fact believed that Kenyon would outlive Hall by many years due to the marked difference in their ages and Hall's narrow survival of a serious bout with colon cancer that later metastasized to the liver—he seems bewildered by the prospect of her absence in both his physical and textual world. Yet in the composition of *Without*, which clearly maintains Kenyon as its focus, Hall undergoes a breakthrough of sorts as he experiences the process of mourning. Three-quarters of the way through the volume and after he records Kenyon's death, Hall begins to compose letter-poems that at once look backward to the memory of his time with Kenyon and forward to the days that mark life's unceasing momentum into the future.

Yet Hall's letter-poems are not indicative of their author's easy recovery; in fact, these poems might best be compared to other kinds of "survivor" narratives. In such texts, the one who returns to the world after enduring the torment of death's presence—whether that be in the midst of war or natural disaster or some other life-threatening occurrence—not only confronts the void left by the deceased's glaring absence but also the memories of the death experience itself. Because Hall works within a theological and ethical structure that asserts the unique, individual nature of each person, his burden as survivor becomes compounded and he cannot merely mourn Kenyon's death and facilely construct a new life. As Alan Soble explains in *The Structure of Love* (1990), the "love for the person [the deceased] conceptually involves irreplaceability.... The beloved is phenomenologically irreplaceable" (290). In this sense, the life that Hall occupies remains essentially the same: he lives in the same house, continues to engage in the same form of work, socializes with the same friends and family. But in the midst of this sameness lies the bitter, irrevocable change—the looming absence of his irreplaceable spouse. In *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994), Martha C. Nussbaum underscores the gravity of such a loss. "We might think of a stretch of daily life with a big empty space in it, the space that the loved person used to fill by his presence," Nussbaum explains. "In fact, the representation of this evaluative proposition, properly done, might require a whole series of picturings, as she would notice the person's absence in every corner of her existence, notice the breaking of a thousand delicate and barely perceptible threads. Another sort of picturing would also be possible: she could see that wonderful beloved face, and see it both as enormously beloved and as irretrievably cut off from her.... Whether pictorially displayed or not," Nussbaum adds, "it represents the dead person as of enormous importance, as unlike anything or anyone else in the world" (375).

Read in terms of Nussbaum's observations about the enormous power that the dead exert upon the living, Hall's recourse to the letter-poems seems remarkably apropos. Although Kenyon has been physically and irretrievably removed from Hall's life, she still exists in his mind as a figure of "enormous importance." To deny her place in the workings of his everyday world by attempting to move precipitously beyond their shared memories would in itself be unethical; to discount the significance of the accretion of shared experience would be a lie of enormous consequence. "The breaking of a thousand delicate and barely perceptible threads," which Nussbaum proffers as an image of mourning, while apt, might be better transformed,

in Hall's circumstance, into the image of frayed and dangling nerves, shorn by the impact of the death of the person with whom he shared his life. Nothing could prepare him for the loss of so significant a part of his being. In their marriage, Hall and Kenyon truly cleaved to one another; their love—a shared joy in the physical pleasures of their bodies, as well as a recognition of the ways in which their minds met and transformed each other—binds them with an irreplaceable intimacy.

In "Letter with No Address," Hall offers frank testimony about the distressing reality of his situation: Kenyon has no address; Hall has no way to reach her. As he writes in this initial letter, "You know now / whether the soul survives death. / Or you don't. When you were dying / you said you didn't fear / punishment. We never dared / to speak of Paradise" (50). Yet whether Kenyon now knows "Paradise" or nothing at all, Hall remains a survivor in "hell," as he phrases his situation in "Letter after a Year," playing "in repertory the same / script without you, without love" (77). But an ethics of mourning, while acknowledging the "hell" in which the mourner lives, attempts to fashion healing methodologies for contending with grief. *In How We Grieve* (1996), Thomas Attig refers to this phenomenon as the process of "relearning the world." In short, Hall must come to terms with the void in his life left by Kenyon's departure. Attig explains that the death of a loved one is a "choiceless event.... As survivors, we control little of death's timing or character," he continues. "Most of us, with a choice, would will that the dead live" (32). Yet Hall, as with others who mourn, never enjoys such a choice. Kenyon cannot live again, nor can Hall stop communicating with her in his verse.

In what would appear to be an impossible predicament, Hall uses the tools of his literary trade to transcend the physical barriers of the grave in order to speak with Kenyon. For Hall, the letter-poems serve as a form of narrative therapy. He writes with no illusion that his words may somehow miraculously find their way to her, but rather, with the knowledge that he must express himself in this way or be damned to a life of repressed rage, to an abiding sense of pain that could threaten his very sanity. The letter-poems yield Hall with individual moments of catharsis. He begins his series of epistolary poems by sharing his "news," by telling Jane about the weather, about births and deaths in the village where they lived, about visits with friends, about his enduring grief over her absence.

Buttercups circle the planks
of the old wellhead
this May while your silken
gardener's body withers or moulds
in the Proctor graveyard.
I drive and talk to you crying
and come back to this house
to talk to your photographs. (49)

Hall concludes "Letter with No Address" with a reverie, imagining that while he drives home from his visit at the graveyard, Kenyon has returned, "bags of groceries upright / in the back of the Saab, / its trunk lid delicately raised / as if proposing an encounter, / dog-fashion, with the Honda" (52). Although the erotic humour of Hall's lines cannot be overlooked, the ultimate loss of the possibility for such an encounter, "dog-fashion" or otherwise, presides over the passage. Such a moment of displacement—clearly Kenyon cannot rise from the grave to join her husband in the present—reflects the spatial and temporal "relearning" to which Attig refers. "Within the lived space of human care we experience things, places, and persons as near or remote, not more or less distant by some objective measure," Attig observes. "Within the lived time of human care and concern we experience past, present, and future as inseparable and interpenetrating phases of personal life history" (118). Not surprisingly, then, as we progress with Hall through *Without*'s therapeutic pages, we witness his various encounters with profound obstacles in his attempt to "relearn" his world. At many instances in the volume, Hall rages against the reality of Kenyon's death and longs for "everything to end," or as he explains in "Midwinter Letter," "I lean forward from emptiness / eager for more emptiness" (74).

At the same time that we witness Hall's rage and despair, we become privy also to the initial epiphanies of healing that will ensure his survival.[8] In these moments of recovery, the function of memory plays an essential role in the composition of his verse. While "recovery" may fallaciously suggest that one may fully advance beyond or recover completely from the loss of another, it more usefully implies a return to equilibrium; rather than imply that we should eschew our memories of the dead, recovery in this sense connotes a movement into a new relationship with them. In short,

the presence of the deceased never really leaves us. An ethics of mourning instead allows us to recognize the continued proximity of the deceased in memory and the manner in which this relationship impacts our conceptions of the world in the here and now. As Hall struggles to regain his equilibrium—a balance between his grief that with each day recedes into his past and the everyday activity of his life in the present thatis, at least in part, guided by the memory of Kenyon—he learns to objectify his sorrow. In "Postcard: January 22nd," Kenyon's death metamorphoses into a child he bears: "I feed her, / bathe her, rock her, and change her diapers. / She lifts her small skull, trembling / and tentative. She smiles, spits up, shits / in a toilet, learns to read and multiply. /1 watch her grow, prosper, thrive. / She is the darling of her mother's old age" (73). By writing a postcard to his dead wife, he recognizes the privileged position that he has afforded his grief. The nature of the act of writing permits him to perceive from a new perspective what his life has become, and Hall understands that if he hopes to avoid being consumed by the presence of Kenyon's death, he will have to allow this child born from death's ashes, "darling of her mother's old age," to grow up and leave the house.

Hall's interactions with the living world ultimately provide him with a means for regaining his equilibrium and with the capacity for sending his grief out into the world.[9] The emotional and geographical proximity of his son Andrew, as well as his grandchildren, buoy his spiritual state; in many respects, they act as his saving grace. To sustain an active and healthy relationship with his son, his grandchildren, or his friends, Hall must invest at least a portion of his energy in the present. When all three of Andrew's children sit on Hall's lap while he reads them stories, or, perhaps, when he cooks a meatloaf for their dinner, their presence allows him to recognize the interpersonal value inherent in living in the present, a significant factor in any ethics of mourning. While at times Hall still cannot bear the company of others—in "Letter at Christmas" he recounts spending Thanksgiving at Andrew's home, where for "three hours we played, / teased, laughed together. / Suddenly I had to drive home" (63)—the vitality of his visits with family and friends resonates within him. The very fact that he relates such events to Kenyon via the letter-poems speaks volumes about the significance of such moments. In "Midwinter Letter," a visit from his daughter Philippa and her children transforms the poet's soul, as well as his sense of purpose:

> Philippa brought
> the children from Concord
> to wade in Eagle pond. Allison
> showed me a wild strawberry plant.
> Abigail snatched at minnows
> and laughed. For an hour
> I watched them play.... (57)

By bringing "play" back into their grandfather's life, Allison and Abigail nurture Hall towards what Rando, in *Grief, Dying, and Death*, refers to as the "reestablishment phase," a time when "emotional energy is reinvested in new persons, things, and ideas" (35).

Striving to "reinvest" his life in others, Hall confesses to Kenyon in "Midwinter Letter" that he often reads his "letters aloud / to our friends" (75). As a form of narrative therapy, it becomes important for Hall not only to write to himself (and to Kenyon) but also to share the act of healing with others. By reading these letter-poems to friends, Hall releases himself from the strict intimacy of grief that he maintains with his deceased wife. He invites those friends and family members who are close to him, who already share his life and in the past shared Kenyon's as well, to enter fully into his being by visiting him in his grief. In this act, he opens the door to the living without closing the door to the dead, establishing human community as a reference for meaning in both his present and his past lives. In "Weeds and Peonies," the last poem in *Without*, Hall reveals that his progress has been slow, that his grief remains fresh. In the poem, he walks among Kenyon's peonies in the garden where she spent so much of her time. As Kenyon often did, Hall carries "one magnanimous blossom indoors" to float in a glass bowl. This action demonstrates the tenderness of memory and the importance of past ritual, as well as the force of "grief's repeated particles" which "suffuse the air— / like the dog yipping through the entire night, / or the cat stretching awake, then curling / as if to dream of her mother's milky nipples" (81). Hall concludes the poem by recalling Kenyon's daily hikes up Mount Kearsarge and his loving words of caution to her as she started her journey each day. He employs the image of the peonies who "lean their vast heads westward / as if they might topple" to speak to the

fragility and precariousness of our condition, as surely an ethics of mourning ought to do.

As poets, Kenyon and Hall shared an enduring belief in the transcendence of language. Taken from her poem, "Afternoon at MacDowell," the epitaph on Kenyon's headstone—a grave that Hall will one day occupy with his wife—underscores art's healing powers and its capacity for celebrating the mysterious interpersonal fabric of human relationships: "I believe in the miracles of art but what / prodigy will keep you safe beside me," it reads. Through his poetry, Hall miraculously survives the death of his wife by writing her into existence each day, by making life from death in his verse. Yet at the same time, Hall's ethics of mourning provides him with a means for sharing his recovery with others. By publishing Without and giving poetry readings across the United States—indeed, throughout the world—Hall succeeds in sharing his grief with the multiplicity of other "friends" who also registered Kenyon's loss. It is through this enduring narrative process—an extended form of narrative therapy in itself—that Hall finally constructs an ethics of mourning that allows him both to revel in Kenyon's memory and to enjoy a healthy sense of personal renewal. In Without, Hall not only memorializes Kenyon's life, but saves his own as well.

NOTES

1. We are especially grateful to Donald Hall for his insights and his generous correspondence during the composition of this essay.'
2. For additional discussion regarding literature as a means of narrative therapy, as well as a vehicle for the interdisciplinary study of family systems psychotherapy, see Barbara A. Kaufman's "Training Tales in Family Therapy: Exploring *The Alexandria Quartet,"Journal qf Marital and Family Therapy* 21.1 (1995): 67-75- Kaufman argues that "inclusion of novels in didactic contexts encourages trainees to search their own experiences, thereby maximizing the opportunity for positive therapeutic inter action and highlighting the variety of treatment approaches in the field" (70). See also Janine Roberts's *Tales and Transformations: Stories in Families and Family Therapy* (New York: Norton, 1994), which features an appendix that enumerates a host of existing "family systems novels." It is important to note, however, that in many forms of narrative therapy, including that of which White and Epston speak, narra tives are told to reshape the experience, to help the person by recasting stories and thus breaking away from old patterns of behaviour. This is not the case for Hall in *Without*, a long narrative poem that does not recast events but instead narrates those events as a form of release. By serving as an emotional release—similar to the story of a survivor of some irremediable event—Hall's story of Kenyon's death serves as a means of expiation, an act that over time will not so much recast the narrative, allowing for behavioural change, but instead release the power of grief through dissipation.
3. For another example of the ways in which ethical criticism accounts for the moral import inherent in the act of mourning, see Kenneth Reinhard's fine interpretation of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove:* "Death is both that which we 'cannot possibly not know,'" Reinhard writes, "and that which we 'never can directly know,' since it marks the end of our knowledge" (138).
4. Thomas Attig insists that grieving, if one is to move beyond it, must be an active process. While he does not suggest, as we have in this essay, that grieving is neces sarily an imaginative act, he does contend that "it is vital that we reject ideas of grieving as passive and embrace ideas of it as active. By definition, bereavement *happens to* us.... [But] grieving as coping requires that we respond actively, invest energy, and address tasks" (32-33).
5. Both Hall and Kenyon write about their move to Hall's ancestral home in New Hampshire as a turning point in their marital and writing lives, and in Bill Moyers's award-winning documentary, *Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon: A Life Together* (1994), we observe them as they speak about the creation of their shared life in poetry and in the natural world beyond poetry as something that coalesced out of a keen sense of place. For more discussion regarding Hall's connection to Eagle Pond Farm, see *Here at Eagle Pond Farm* (1990) and *String Too Short to Be Saved* (1981).
6. In his essay, "Graveyard People," collected in *Principal Products of Portugal* (1995), Hall addresses the manner in which America has attempted to gloss over death through the ways that we mourn and bury our dead. Speaking about his visits with Jane to graveyards in New Hampshire, he remarks, "Reading the names and dates of the old stones, as we root around in boneyards, we note the omnipresence of death for our ancestors—so many dead children, so many wives dead and husbands remarried and new dead infants of new brides. Is it by a reaction, now, that we avoid any confrontation with death?" Rather sadly, Hall concludes that "contemporary memorial institutions—like Forest Lawn—attest to avoidance only" (65).
7. While clearly choosing the "right" details are essential to the success of a narrative or a poem for a publishing author, Polkinghorne explains the importance of such choices in terms of narrative therapy. "The reflective awareness of one's personal narrative provides the realization that past events are not meaningful in themselves but are given significance by the configuration of one's narrative," Polkinghorne notes. "This realization," he continues, "can release people from the control of past interpretations they have attached to events and open up the possibility of renewal and freedom for change" (182-83).

8. In one sense, Hall serves as his own therapist. By writing poetry about his loss and the "epiphanies" that lead him back toward the land of the living, he fulfills what Robert Coles considers to be poetry's vital role: "Poets try to sharpen the sight, to nurture language carefully in the hope of calling upon it for an understanding of what is happening.... Poets give us images and metaphors and offer the epiphanies doctors and patients alike crave, even if it is in the silent form of a slant of late after noon light" (101). Importantly, Hall does not rely solely on his own verse in his quest for transcendence. Instead, he turns to other poets for healing. In "Art for Life for Art," collected in *Principal Products of Portugal,* Hall reveals that the "mathematics of poetry's formal resolution does not preclude moral thought, or satisfaction in honest naming, or the consolation of shared feeling. When someone dear to me dies, I go back to the seventeenth-century poets for consolation" (79). In yet another essay from the same collection, "The Unsayable Said," Hall intimates that poetry may be used as a form of narrative therapy: "When I grieve I go to poems that grieve.... In the act of reading, we exercise or practice emotion, griefs and joys, erotic transport and the anguish of loss—as if poems were academies of feeling, as if in reading poems we practiced emotion and understandings of emotion" (86).

9. During the course of this essay, we often use the word "begin" to refer to Hall's position in the coping process for two reasons: first, *Without* only chronicles Hall's initial year of grieving, never speaking to his present state of mind, and, second, "relearning" one's world remains at all times a process in which we are involved, not one that we "complete" or "finish." An ethics of mourning demands that we resist the narrative desire for absolute resolution, for a "complete" recovery, because it simply does not exist. Instead, we acknowledge that we share the burden of our loved ones' deaths until we also die; in this way, we participate in an enduring process of human interrelationship. As Rando explains, "The loss is not forgotten, but merely put in a special place which, while allowing it to be remembered, also frees the mourner to go on to new attachments without being pathologically tied to the old ones" (*Grief* 35).