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**TRENTON B. OLSEN**

Trenton Olsen graduated from Utah State University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English literary studies and a minor in sociology. He was named the 2009 Outstanding Undergraduate Researcher for the university as well as the Utah Humanities Council Undergraduate Research Fellow of the Year. Trenton will enroll this fall in the doctoral program in English literature at the University of Minnesota, and eventually hopes to work as a professor of English.

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*Trenton B. Olsen*

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“UNHOLY GHOST”: JANE KENYON AND  
THE RELIGIOUS BINARIES OF DEPRESSION

When asked about the religious element in her poetry, award-winning American poet and devout Christian Jane Kenyon said in an interview with Mike Pride, “My spiritual life is so much a part of my intellectual life and my feeling life that it’s really become impossible for me to keep it out of my work.”<sup>1</sup> The fact that religion plays an integral role in Kenyon’s intellectual life is evident in an examination of her poetry, which is filled with the images and language of her faith. The ways in which her faith affects her “feeling life,” however, are inevitably and complexly connected with her lifelong struggle with depression. Her husband, former poet laureate Donald Hall, relates an episode of coming home and finding Kenyon in an “exalted and shining mood,” having felt an enlightening, comforting presence she “associated with the holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> These blissful moods, however, were very rare; her depression, as she told Bill Moyers, was “more like a unipolar depression,” in which she experienced long relentless attacks of profound melancholy.<sup>3</sup> While Kenyon understood her depression as a biochemically determined illness, she chose to represent it as the exact opposite

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1. *Simply Lasting: Writers on Jane Kenyon*, ed. Joyce Peseroff (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2005), 105.

2. Lynn Strongin, “A Faith that Blessed Through Sorrow,” *Simply Lasting*, 222.

3. *Simply Lasting*, 187.

of this exalting presence—an evil spirit she terms the “unholy ghost.”<sup>4</sup> These binaries in Kenyon’s descriptions of her depression are most clearly evident in “Now Where?” and “Having it Out with Melancholy.” While the opposition in the poems reveals her sense that, at times, the promises of Christianity do not apply to her, it also represents her effort to keep her disorder in perspective while maintaining her faith.

Both poems portray her depression as the antithesis of the Holy Ghost—an evil spirit that is always with her and possesses her body. Perhaps Kenyon’s characterization of her depression as an “unholy ghost” can be traced back to her childhood fear regarding the concept of the Holy Spirit. Laban Hill provides insight regarding Kenyon’s Methodist grandmother, who had a “dark obsession with Christ’s second coming and the end of the world;” her rhetoric of hellfire and brimstone gave her young granddaughter an early conception of Christianity as a religion of fear.<sup>5</sup> So when her grandmother told her as a young girl that “the body is the temple of the Holy Ghost,” she was frightened at the prospect of a ghost possessing her body.<sup>6</sup> “Now Where?” personifies her depression as a dark spirit which constantly follows the speaker:

It wakes when I wake, walks  
when I walk, turns back when I  
turn back, beating me to the door.<sup>7</sup>

Like the Holy Spirit, which Christ promises to His followers as a constant companion, this unholy ghost is always with her. However, unlike the promised Comforter, it is a dark, tormenting spirit from which she physically cannot escape. John H. Timmerman quotes an earlier draft of “Having It Out with Melancholy” that reveals Kenyon’s emphasis on this binary. As her depression

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4. Jane Kenyon, “Having it Out with Melancholy,” in *Otherwise: New and Selected Poems* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1996), 189–93.

5. Laban Hill, “Jane Kenyon,” *American Writers Supplement 2* (2001), 113–44, 113.

6. Hill, 115.

7. Jane Kenyon, “Now Where” in *Otherwise*, 164.

occupies the role of the Holy Ghost, she addresses her melancholy, saying,

You and I are finished, companion  
of years and days, so familiar  
I thought you were my friend.<sup>8</sup>

The final version of the poem reveals that Kenyon has struggled with this unwanted companionship from her birth. The poem's opening section reveals the evil spirit's possession and control over the speaker's body.

When I was born...  
...you lay down  
on top of me, pressing  
the bile of desolation into every pore.<sup>9</sup>

The thought of depression as an ever-present companion is troubling indeed. If, as Paul teaches, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, [and] longsuffering,"<sup>10</sup> then the unholy ghost brings the fruit of self-loathing, misery, and, as Kenyon's earlier draft states, "hatred of the world."<sup>11</sup> While the Holy Ghost sanctifies and brings one closer to the divine, the evil spirit of depression is a "mutilator of souls" and "ruin[s her] manners toward God."<sup>12</sup>

The speaker's despair makes her feel that she is abandoned by God, and prevents her from enjoying His promised joy and peace. Her despondency in "Now Where?" is reflected in the lines: "It spoils my food and steals my sleep" and "If I lie down or sit up it's all the same."<sup>13</sup> In her suffering, she is bereft of any spiritual consolation as the unholy ghost mockingly asks her, "Where's your

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8. John H Timmerman, *Jane Kenyon: A Literary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William E. Eardman's Publishing Company, 2002), 195.

9. Kenyon, 189.

10. Galations 5:22

11. Timmerman, 195.

12. Kenyon, 189.

13. Kenyon, 164.

God now?"<sup>14</sup> This line is placed at the end of the second stanza, suggesting that the speaker has no answer to the evil spirit's jesting question. Her response is only to lie down "like a widow."<sup>15</sup> While this simile certainly conveys a sense of loneliness and sorrow, it specifically suggests that she has been abandoned by God. Her description of herself as a widow recalls Christ's parable in which He presents Himself as the bridegroom to His followers, who enter into a spiritual covenant relationship with Him. As a widow she feels that either Christ has forsaken her as though He were dead, or that His death is final, denying His promised resurrection. This reading is consistent with the poem's concluding lines:

To strangers I must seem  
 alive. Spring comes, summer;  
 cool, clear weather; heat, rain....<sup>16</sup>

Uncharacteristically for Kenyon, the arrival of spring with its natural manifestations of new life does not bring her comfort. She portrays herself as being dead, and does not feel that the Christian promise of rebirth applies to her. Her sense that God has abandoned her seems a confirmation of the childhood fear she describes in her poem "Staying at Grandma's"<sup>17</sup> In the poem she questions why, if her grandmother loved her, she would tell her about Christ coming unexpectedly to two women—taking one to be with Him and leaving the other alone. Feeling abandoned by the promised bridegroom, she has only the unholy ghost who brings a misery like spiritual death.

"Melancholy" conveys the same sense of God-forsaken misery as the unholy ghost prevents the speaker from partaking of Christianity's promised blessings. In 1980 Kenyon had a spiritual vision and saw "a great stream of light," in which "every human life was suspended;" this had a significant impact on her

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14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Kenyon, 145.

conversion to Christianity.<sup>18</sup> She relates the vision in the fifth section of “Melancholy,” but she is prevented from partaking of the life-giving light of the stream by the unholy ghost. Kenyon describes herself in the poem as “a speck of light” floating in the river of light “with the whole / human family. We were all colors.”<sup>19</sup> Kenyon’s use of the plural pronoun and the word *family* emphasize communal belonging. Timmerman notes that this instance represents a release from the isolation of depression in which the speaker is at one with “normal” society.<sup>20</sup> This is a blissful moment of joy and community in contrast to the despair and isolation of depression, that prompts the speaker’s words, “For a few moments . . . I no longer hated having to exist.”<sup>21</sup> This relief from suffering, however, is indeed momentary, as it is interrupted by the arrival of the unholy ghost:

Like a crow who smells hot blood  
 you came flying to pull me out  
 of the glowing stream.  
 “I’ll hold you up. I never let my dear  
 ones drown!”<sup>22</sup>

This scene emphasizes the binary of the evil spirit and the Holy Ghost. The speaker’s depression, the unholy ghost, is personified as a crow. This black bird of death represents the opposite of the Holy Spirit, who descends in the form of the dove at the baptism of Jesus. While the evil spirit holds itself up as a rescuer, it keeps her from the source of life and light she desires. Once the speaker shows signs of life and vibrancy, this bird of death and despondency smells her “hot blood” and drags her away from the water. Although the unholy ghost gives the appearance of uplifting her, by taking her from the living waters, he brings her down into darkness, isolation, and spiritual death. “After that [she]

18. Qtd. in Hill, 127.

19. Kenyon, 190.

20. Timmerman, 200.

21. Kenyon, 191.

22. Ibid.

wept for days” as the prior feelings of self-loathing and despair returned with increased intensity.<sup>23</sup>

Amidst these feelings of abandonment and anguish, Kenyon recognizes her depression as an illness for which she is not responsible. In the poem’s third section Kenyon relates the insensitive advice from a friend: “You wouldn’t be so depressed if you really believed in God.”<sup>24</sup> This represents what Paul Breslin describes as an older, more traditional way of viewing mental illness, “as primarily a disease of soul rather than body.”<sup>25</sup> This is also highlighted in the poet’s use of the older word “melancholy” in the poem, rather than the more modern term “depression.” Kenyon also represents depression from a modern medical perspective, emphasizing the chemical nature of her sickness in the poem’s second section, in which she lists an arsenal of medications to combat her depression. The following two, earlier variations of the poem highlight the absurdity of the friend’s advice, emphasizing the nature of the disease as medical rather than spiritual:

If you really believed  
in God, your pancreas would  
produce enough insulin.<sup>26</sup>

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Your bones aren’t really broken!  
Take off that body cast and change  
your tune.<sup>27</sup>

Timmerman comments, “The depressive cannot suddenly cease being depressed any more than the diabetic can stop being diabetic, or the person in

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23. Ibid.

24. Kenyon, 190.

25. Paul Breslin, “Jane Kenyon’s ‘Manners Toward God’: Gratitude and the Anti-Urge,” *Simply*, 205.

26. Qtd. in Timmerman, 197.

27. Ibid.

the body cast can get up. All three are states that one learns to live with.”<sup>28</sup> The assumption of the friend’s perspective is that depression is induced by a certain behavior or mindset, and therefore can be cured by a change of behavior or a better attitude. Kenyon keeps the fallacy of this view in perspective, maintaining in the poem that she is not to blame for the disorder. As a new medication stops her depressive pain, the speaker returns to her normal life “with the wonder and bitterness of someone pardoned for a crime she did not commit,” emphasizing her innocence and confessing to her depression, “There is nothing I can do against your coming.”<sup>29</sup> The poem’s beginning at the baby’s nursery reinforces the idea that the speaker is born with, and therefore not responsible for, her depressed condition.

This perspective, strengthened by Kenyon’s faith, brings some degree of comfort in the belief that although she cannot now see the fulfillment of Christianity’s promises, God will not ultimately abandon her. A depressive is tormented by the self-perception that he or she is not good enough, and cannot do anything right. It is important, therefore, that the speaker maintains the knowledge that she suffers from an illness for which she is not to be blamed. Her belief in a just God gives her a hope that He will not abandon her in the end for something that is not her fault. Even during the speaker’s suffering, there is a moment of comfort in her dog’s companionship. In the sixth section

The dog searches until he finds me  
upstairs, lies down with a clatter  
of elbows, puts his head on my foot.

Sometimes the sound of his breathing  
saves my life—in and out, in  
and out; a pause, a long sigh....<sup>30</sup>

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28. Timmerman, 197.

29. Kenyon, 191–2.

30. Kenyon, 191.

While the dog's presence brings a physical comfort as a living presence other than her relentless depression, these lines convey a deeper, more spiritual meaning. Timmerman states, "Essentially, the dog breathes for her. As such the act suggests the breath of the Holy Spirit and an act of grace."<sup>31</sup> Even in her deep suffering, the spirit brings some comfort. While her illness diminishes her ability to feel the presence of the divine, she feels that the Holy Ghost is still with her and helps her to keep on living. While hope is much more difficult to find in "Now Where," the closing lines describing the onset of spring can be read as a reassurance. Even though she cannot presently feel the new life of Christianity or the presence of the promised bridegroom, it is still there, and Christ, according to His promise, will not forsake her. This conviction and her knowledge that she has not done anything to deserve her suffering, or to estrange herself from God, give her something to cling to in her despair.

Considering her depression in religious terms is certainly not a cure for Kenyon, nor does it bring comfort sufficient to outweigh her intense suffering. However, her faith in a future relief from sorrow helps her to keep going and make the moments of peace more meaningful. The final two sections of "Melancholy" portray the speaker's relief from her anguish.

Pharmaceutical wonders are at work  
but I believe in this moment  
of well-being.<sup>32</sup>

Kenyon's language suggests an intersection between the religious and the medical discourse. While she acknowledges the chemical element of her happiness, the word "wonder" has more of a divine connotation; she chooses to believe that her well-being is due to spiritual as well as medical forces, making it more meaningful to her. In the life-affirming final stanza, Kenyon notes that she is "high" on June light as well as Nardil, emphasizing the duality of her

31. Timmerman, 201.

32. Kenyon, 192.

temporary relief, as both spiritual and chemical.<sup>33</sup> She is “overcome by ordinary contentment” and wonders, “What hurt me so terribly all my life until this moment?”<sup>34</sup> She is delighted by the song of a “wood thrush” and its “bright, unequivocal eye.”<sup>35</sup> At the same time, she recognizes that this happiness is precarious, as the “unholy ghost” is “certain to come again” and that after rising at four, her emotions will eventually sink back down.<sup>36</sup> However, she enjoys the moment of peace and realizes that there will be future solace as well as suffering. Kenyon said, “My belief in God has kept me from harming myself,” and that “searching for God is the first thing and the last thing, but in between such trouble and such pain.”<sup>37</sup> This suggests that these “moment[s] of well-being,” which she associates with religion as well as medicine, keep her alive during the difficult times, like the reassuring breathing of her dog, or the presence of the Holy Spirit. While the unholy ghost of depression will come back, so, too, will the wood thrush and the morning light, bringing solace as well as suffering. This knowledge enables Kenyon to “let evening come,” knowing that it will eventually give way to the morning and that her suffering will eventually be alleviated with a healing, albeit a temporary relief.<sup>38</sup>

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33. Kenyon, 193.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. Qtd. in Hill, 135.

38. Kenyon, 176.

## Now Where?

Jane Kenyon

It wakes when I wake, walks  
when I walk, turns back when I  
turn back, beating me to the door.

It spoils my food and steals  
my sleep, and mocks me, saying,  
“Where is your God now?”

And so, like a widow, I lie down  
after supper. If I lie down  
or sit up it’s all the same:

the days and nights bear me along.  
To strangers I must seem  
alive. Spring comes, summer;

cool clear weather; heat, rain....

## Having It Out with Melancholy

Jane Kenyon

If many remedies are prescribed for an illness,  
you may be certain that the illness has no cure.

A.P. Chekhov

*The Cherry Orchard*

*1 From the Nursery*

When I was born, you waited  
behind a pile of linen in the nursery,  
and when we were alone, you lay down  
on top of me, pressing  
the bile of desolation into every pore.

And from that day on  
everything under the sun and moon  
made me sad—even the yellow  
wooden beads that slid and spun  
along a spindle on my crib.

You taught me to exist without gratitude.  
You ruined my manners toward God:  
“We’re here simply to wait for death;  
the pleasures of earth are overrated.”

I only appeared to belong to my mother,  
to live among blocks and cotton undershirts  
with snaps; among red tin lunch boxes  
and report cards in ugly brown slipcases.  
I was already yours—the anti-urge,  
the mutilator of souls.

*2 Bottles*

Elavil, Ludiomil, Doxepin,  
Norpramin, Prozac, Lithium, Xanax,  
Wellbutrin, Parnate, Nardil, Zoloft.  
The coated ones smell sweet or have  
no smell; the powdery ones smell  
like the chemistry lab at school  
that made me hold my breath.

*3 Suggestion from a Friend*

You wouldn't be so depressed  
if you really believed in God.

*4 Often*

Often I go to bed as soon after dinner  
as seems adult  
(I mean I try to wait for dark)  
in order to push away  
from the massive pain in sleep's  
frail wicker coracle.

*5 Once There was Light*

Once, in my early thirties, I saw  
that I was a speck of light in the great  
river of light that undulates through time.

I was floating with the whole  
human family. We were all colors—those  
who are living now, those who have died,  
those who are not yet born. For a few

moments I floated, completely calm,  
and I no longer hated having to exist.

Like a crow who smells hot blood  
you came flying to pull me out  
of the glowing stream.  
“I’ll hold you up. I never let my dear  
ones drown!” After that, I wept for days.

*6 In and Out*

The dog searches until he finds me  
upstairs, lies down with a clatter  
of elbows, puts his head on my foot.

Sometimes the sound of his breathing  
saves my life—in and out, in  
and out; a pause, a long sigh....

*7 Pardon*

A piece of burned meat  
wears my clothes, speaks  
in my voice, dispatches obligations  
haltingly, or not at all.  
It is tired of trying

to be stouthearted, tired  
beyond measure

We move on to the monoamine  
oxidase inhibitors. Day and night  
I feel as if I had drunk six cups  
of coffee, but the pain stops  
abruptly. With the wonder  
and bitterness of someone pardoned  
for a crime she did not commit  
I come back to marriage and friends,  
to pink-fringed hollyhocks; come back  
to my desk, books, and chair.

8 *Credo*

Pharmaceutical wonders are at work  
but I believe only in this moment  
of well-being. Unholy ghost,  
you are certain to come again.

Coarse, mean, you'll put your feet  
on the coffee table, lean back,  
and turn me into someone who can't  
take the trouble to speak; someone  
who can't sleep, or who does nothing  
but sleep; can't read, or call  
for an appointment for help.

There is nothing I can do  
against your coming.  
*When I awake, I am still with thee.*

9 *Wood Thrush*

High on Nardil and June light  
I wake at four,  
waiting greedily for the first  
notes of the wood thrush. Easeful air  
presses through the screen  
with the wild, complex song  
of the bird, and I am overcome

by ordinary contentment.  
What hurt me so terribly  
all my life until this moment?  
How I love the small, swiftly  
beating heart of the bird  
singing in the great maples;  
its bright, unequivocal eye.