

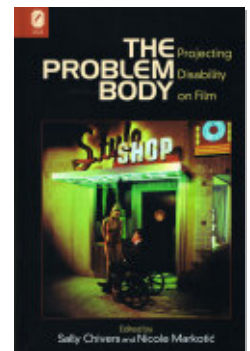


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Explicating the Terminally Ill Body in Margaret Edson's *W;t*

Published by

Chivers, Sally and Nicole Markotic.  
The Problem Body: Projecting Disability in Film.  
The Ohio State University Press, 2010.  
Project MUSE. [muse.jhu.edu/book/27736](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27736).



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HEATH DIEHL



# **“And Death —*capital D*—shall be no more—*semicolon!*”**

*Explicating the Terminally Ill Body in Margaret Edson’s W;t*

VIVIAN: I want to tell you how it feels. I want to explain it, to use *my* words. It’s as if . . . I can’t . . . There aren’t . . . I’m like a student and this is the final exam and I don’t know what to put down because I don’t understand the question and I’m *running out of time*.

—Margaret Edson, *W;t*, 1999

## **Introduction**

Physical pain, as cultural critic Elaine Scarry writes, “has no voice” because it constitutes a sentient experience that “comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed” (3, 4). Representation, on the other hand, seeks to give voice to lived experiences, to translate those experiences into action that circulates among authors, actors/characters, and spectators/readers who are themselves engaged in the process of making meaning. The antithetical relationship between physical pain and its representation, says feminist theorist Elisabeth Bronfen, ensures that “the violence of the real is translated only precariously into representation” (53). As Bronfen explains, “representation attempts to attach the dying, decomposing body, destabilizing in its mobility, to a fixed semantic position” (53). Bronfen suggests that attempts to fix the body-in-pain to a “semantic position” necessarily are doomed to fail because “signifying nothing, [pain and death] point to the indetermination of meaning so that one can speak of death only by

speaking other. At the point where all language fails [pain and death are] also the source of all allegorical speaking" (54).<sup>1</sup>

For both Scarry and Bronfen, physical pain initiates a representational vanishing point, a site within representation at which sentient experiences (seem to) cease to exist. As a felt-experience rooted within the body, physical pain destabilizes any representational apparatus that seeks to codify and contain its meaning. As an empirically verifiable experience, death too enters "precariously into representation" (Bronfen 53), its visibility rendered unstable by the "indetermination of meaning" that constitutes the very nature of the experience. Unrepresentable because they signify no tangible referent in the physical world, then, physical pain and death enter into representation through extended allegories, whereby sentience takes the form of a concrete image, its abstract qualities personified by characters who signify "meanings independent of the action in the surface of the story" (Holman and Harmon 11).<sup>2</sup>

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1. While I would not want unconditionally to conflate physical pain and death, given that there are many sentient experiences (e.g., torture) that do not necessarily posit an equivalency between the two, terminal illness (the focus of this essay) constitutes a sentient experience that links pain and death. As Scarry has written, "pain is the equivalent in felt-experience of what is unfeeling in death" (31). Therefore, the apparent collusion between theories of bodily pain (Scarry) and death (Bronfen) here is an intentional means of framing the larger argument I assert in the body of the essay.

2. Terminal illness constitutes perhaps the most frequently allegorized sentient experience in film. Although the medium of film is, as Mary Ann Doane writes, "characterized by an illusory sensory plenitude (there is 'so much to see')" (231), cinema has historically relied on a limited range of allegorical narratives to "translate" the lived experiences of terminal illness. Some films intimate that terminal illness grants wisdom and serenity to an individual whose life prior to diagnosis was chaotic, due to misplaced priorities (e.g., and *Terms of Endearment*). Other films posit terminal illness (and the concomitant death of the terminally ill individual) as the means through which conventional social structures (especially heteronormativity and the "nuclear family") are recuperated (e.g., *Stepmom*, *An Early Frost*, and *In the Gloaming*). And still other films identify terminal illness and death as retribution for transgressions of firmly entrenched social norms (e.g., the Camille narrative, as in *Beaches* and *As Is*). While each of these examples spins a slightly different "existential" narrative about the personal/collective meanings of terminal illness and death, all have one telling common denominator: they elide any consideration of how terminal illness impacts the fleshy, material body. In each of these examples, the material body and the lived experiences of illness become vehicles through which to convey a philosophical/spiritual message about the "meaning of life," rather than a means to analyze the body's journey through sickness and death. Stated differently, in each of these films a character personifies illness, rendering the real (but abstract) experience of pain concrete through an allegorical narrative that references experiences outside the body (of the text).

Not surprisingly, critics of Margaret Edson's *W;t*<sup>3</sup> read the play/film<sup>4</sup> as an allegory of death.<sup>5</sup> The play and film follow Dr. Vivian Bearing—a professor of seventeenth-century literature and a specialist on the poetry of John Donne—through her diagnosis of, treatment for, and eventual death from fourth-stage ovarian cancer. In a discussion of the play, high school teacher Carol Jago suggests that “[a]nyone who has seen or read *W;t* has no doubt that playwright Margaret Edson knows quite a lot about literature, but also about life” (21). Similarly, in *The North American Review*, critic Robert L. King suggests, “If *W;t*’s premise seems contrived and Bearing’s interests arcane, the play in performance is a deeply felt, human and humane experience” (49). For *American Theatre* critic James S. Torrens, the “humanity” of the play rests on a thematic link between Donne’s poetry and Bearing’s medical condition. As Torrens explains, “At the conclusion [of *W;t* Edson] ties up a thematic thread of the story, John Donne’s habit of hiding from God behind his wit, with a children’s tale that E. M. Ashford [Bearing’s graduate school mentor] reads to the barely conscious Vivian Bearing. It is a fable of young animals trying to run away from their parents and always being found—an allegory, says Ashford” (28).

Such readings of *W;t* are, I argue, deceptively (and erroneously) simple precisely because they ignore the more complex representational strategy undergirding the film’s narrative. I contend that *W;t* constitutes a rare addition to the corpus of films about terminal illness, an example of what Scarry says is “an isolated play, an exceptional film . . . that is not

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3. Readers might note that the titles of the stage play and the teleplay differed in one important respect: the teleplay substituted an “i” where in the original stage play title a semicolon appeared (i.e., *W;t*). Throughout this essay I employ throughout the title of the original stage play, semicolon included, not in order to render hazy the important and noteworthy differences between *W;t*-as-stage-play and *W;t*-as-teleplay (a topic that I take up and explore in the section titled “Textual Differences” below); rather, I retain the original spelling in recognition of the central role that close textual reading and, in particular, punctuation plays in Vivian Bearing’s interpretation of Donne’s Holy Sonnets (and in my own reading of *W;t* that follows).

4. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that while Emma Thompson and Mike Nichols are the credited adapters for the teleplay version of *W;t*, this teleplay is almost identical in both structure and content to the original stage play (with only one major exception, which I discuss below in the section titled “Textual Differences”). For that reason (as well as for the sake of clarity and simplicity), I refer to Edson as the “author” of both the teleplay and the stage play throughout.

5. Interestingly, Edson has herself encouraged such readings. In an interview with *American Theatre* writer Adrienne Martini, for example, Edson has commented, “The play is about redemption, and I’m surprised that no one mentions it. . . . Grace is the opportunity to experience God in spite of yourself, which is what Dr. Bearing ultimately achieves” (24, 25). Given that Edson is the author of the play, some credence must be attributed to her comments here. However, the play encourages a New Critical reading (one akin to Bearing’s reading of Donne’s poetry), and critics must resist the urge to equate the meaning of the play/film with the author’s feelings, intentions, or worldviews (what New Critics disdainfully regarded as the “Intentional Fallacy”). Instead, the play must be regarded as “a public text that can be understood by applying the standards of public discourse” (Bressler 41) (here, specifically, the public discourse of literary explication).

just incidentally but centrally and uninterruptedly about the nature of bodily pain" (10). What makes *W;t* so rare is the author's insistence on the analogical, rather than the allegorical, properties of sentience. The film attempts to render felt-experience meaningful by comparing a wholly unfamiliar and strange experience (i.e., sentience, pain, death) with something more familiar, at least for the I-narrator of *W;t*, Bearing: literary explication. By juxtaposing personal diary and literary explication in the direct-address asides (the film's central dramatic conceit), Edson suggests that poetics offers an analogical means through which to read the terminally ill body/text.<sup>6</sup>

In the film, Bearing's New Critical approach to literature is central to the plot, as it informs her understanding of Donne's Holy Sonnets and her experiences with terminal cancer. By alternating between scenes in which Bearing's oncologists diagnose and treat her body and scenes in which Bearing herself explicates Donne's poetry, *W;t* foregrounds the parallels between the sentient experiences of terminal cancer and the analytical process of literary explication. But like allegory, analogy ultimately proves insufficient for explaining the felt-experiences of terminal cancer as each of Bearing's attempts to draw parallels between textuality and ontology fail. While analogy proves as insufficient as allegory at explaining the felt-experiences of terminal cancer, *W;t* does recognize (through Bearing's direct-address asides) that "the only external sign of the felt-experience of pain . . . is the patient's verbal report" (Scarry 6). Through these direct-address asides, *W;t* charts the struggles that derive from any attempt to document the ravages that terminal illness exacts upon the material body. I argue that *W;t* does not provide a "documentary" through which the experience of living with cancer is translated onto celluloid; rather, the film voices a metafilmic commentary on how instances of pain and suffering complicate the process of cinematic creation.

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6. The distinction that I seek to draw between analogy and allegory is slight but significant. Analogy, as Holman and Harmon illustrate, constitutes a literary device "by which something unfamiliar is explained or described by comparing it to something more familiar" (20). On the other hand, allegory is a "form of extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. Thus, it represents one thing in the guise of another—an abstraction in that of a concrete image" (11). Both analogy and allegory rely on comparison as the means through which to convey meaning. Both point to the similarities between two objects/things that are alike in certain respects. But whereas analogy foregrounds the comparison as a means through which to generate meaning about and facilitate understanding of an experience/object that is unfamiliar, allegory "attempts to evoke a dual interest, one in the events, characters, and setting presented, and the other in the ideas they are intended to convey or the significance that they bear" (11).

## Bodily Poesis

Bearing is a New Critic—a point that is made clear early in the play during a flashback scene depicting Bearing's first encounter with her graduate school mentor, the esteemed E. M. Ashford. In the scene, Ashford criticizes Bearing's essay on Donne's Holy Sonnet Six, claiming, "You have entirely missed the point of the poem, because, I must tell you, you have used an edition of the text that is inauthentically punctuated" (13). Ashford reveals her own training as a New Critic:

You take this too lightly, Miss Bearing. This is Metaphysical Poetry, not The Modern Novel. The standards of scholarship and critical reading which one would apply to any other text are simply insufficient. The effort must be total for the results to be meaningful. Do you think the punctuation of the last line of this sonnet is merely an insignificant detail? The sonnet begins with a valiant struggle with death, calling on all the forces of intellect and drama to vanquish the enemy. But it is ultimately about overcoming the seemingly inseparable barriers separating life, death, and eternal life. In the edition you chose, this profoundly simple meaning is sacrificed to hysterical punctuation.

And death—*capital D*—shall be no more—*semicolon*!

Death—*capital D*—*comma*—thou shalt die—*exclamation point*!

If you go in for this sort of thing, I suggest you take up Shakespeare.  
(13–14)

In this passage Ashford abides by a strict and rigorous attention to detail in her systematic dissection of texts. Dripping with disdain, her comments about both *The Modern Novel* and Shakespeare also convey the gate-keeping mentality with which she approaches the study of literature. In Ashford's mind, "good" and "bad" literature are as clearly demarcated as "authentic" and "inauthentic" punctuation.

Through discussions about her research and teaching, Bearing reveals how thoroughly she has internalized the close textual reading strategies professed by her esteemed mentor. Toward the beginning of *W;t*, Bearing describes her "immeasurable contribution to the discipline of English literature" (17): "a volume on the twelve Holy Sonnets in the 1633 edition, which I produced in the remarkably short span of three years" (19). With great pride Bearing reveals to the audience that in the volume, titled *Made Cunningly*, she "devote[s] one chapter to a thorough exami-

nation of each sonnet, discussing every word in extensive detail. . . . It is exhaustive" (19). That each chapter of Bearing's book centers on one sonnet—as opposed to a theoretical concept, a thematic concern, generic conventions, or a cultural phenomenon—echoes not only Ashford's earlier edict ["You must begin with a text" (13)] but also the New Critic's guiding premise ["The natural and sensible starting point for work in literary scholarship is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves" (Wellek and Warren 139)]. That Bearing dissects each sonnet word by word (and punctuation mark by punctuation mark) in "extensive detail" demonstrates the "*uncompromising way*" (Edson 15) that New Critics (such as Ashford) seek "truth" in intricate phraseology, punctuation, scansion, rhyme, and/or meter. In other words, Bearing's close attention to (textual) detail demonstrates, as Cleanth Brooks once wrote, that for a New Critic, "The meaning must issue from the particulars" ("Irony" 75).

In her teaching Bearing demonstrates the same rigorous attention to textual detail. Toward the middle of *W;t*, Bearing "stands still, as if conjuring a scene" (48), in this case a scene from one of her undergraduate seminars on metaphysical poetry in which Bearing lectures her uninterested students on the minutiae of Donne's Holy Sonnet Five:

The speaker of the sonnet has a brilliant mind, and he plays the part convincingly, but in the end he finds God's *forgiveness* hard to believe, so he crawls under a rock to *hide*.

If arsenic and serpents are not damned, then why is he? In asking the question, the speaker turns eternal damnation into an intellectual game. Why would God choose to do what is *hard*, to condemn, rather than what is *easy*, and also *glorious*—to show mercy?

(Several scholars have disputed Ashford's third comma in line six, but none convincingly.)

But. Exception. Limitation. Contrast. The argument shifts from cleverness to melodrama, an unconvincing eruption of piety: "O" "God" "Oh!"

A typical prayer would plead "Remember me, O Lord." (49–50)

Throughout this lecture Bearing remains an earnest New Critic, holding steady to the belief that "the goal of formal analysis is to show how the various elements in the poem fit together, how the parts cohere to produce the whole" (Keesey 67). Word by word, Bearing winds her way through the sonnet, searching for the answer to the speaker's question ("If arsenic and serpents are not damned, then why is he?") in the

formal features of the poem. For Bearing, the denotations and connotations of specific words (e.g., “But. Exception. Limitation. Contrast.”) provide insight into the speaker’s attitude/tone (e.g., “The argument shifts from cleverness to melodrama.”).

Interestingly, during the lecture scene Edson makes explicit the analogy between the analytical process of literary explication and the sentient experience of terminal cancer. Bearing begins the lecture with a brief introduction to the metaphysical school, its central conceit (“wit”), and its “greatest wit” (John Donne) (48). Afterwards, “The lights dim. A screen lowers, and the sonnet ‘If poisonous minerals,’ from the Gardner edition, appears on it” (49). As Bearing nears the climax of her lecture where she will reveal the “truth” expressed by the poem (“how the parts cohere to produce the whole”), she “moves in front of the screen, and the projection of the poem is cast directly upon her” (50). At this moment in the film, textuality and ontology collude through the visual projection of Donne’s sonnet onto Bearing’s terminally ill body. The distinguishing features of metaphysical poetry transfer from Donne’s sonnet to Bearing’s body, indicating that the lecture—itself an attempt to “embody” the poem—is, for Bearing, analogous to her attempts to understand the lived, bodily experiences of terminal cancer. The analogy, then, reveals Bearing’s desperate attempts to use her training as a literary critic to render her sentient experiences tangible.<sup>7</sup>

## Textual Embodiment

In addition to developing a somewhat interesting thematic parallel, the collusion of textuality with ontology, and of formal analysis with medical practice, serves as a potential means through which Bearing can gain access to the sentient experiences of terminal cancer. Late in the film

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7. One scene later Bearing reiterates the interrelationship between textuality and ontology when she remarks on “the journal article [Kelekian and Jason] will no doubt write about me”: “But I flatter myself. The article will not be about *me*, it will be about my ovaries. It will be about my peritoneal cavity, which, despite their best intentions, is now crawling with cancer. What we have come to think of as *me* is, in fact, just the specimen jar, just the dust jacket, just the white piece of paper that bears the little black marks” (53). Bearing compares her material body to “the white piece of paper that bears the little black marks” and renders her body a poem/text whose meaning derives from the interrelation between its component parts. Like Bearing, Kelekian and Jason believe that if they dissect Bearing’s body into its component parts (tumors, symptoms, organs, etc.), then that body can be reassembled into a coherent (if not ultimately healthy) whole. The medical data implicitly compare to literary interpretation—a similar type of truth statement expressed through the constituent parts (“the little black marks”) that constitute the body/text (“the white piece of paper”).



Bearing reveals in direct-address asides, "I want to tell you how it feels. I want to explain it, to use *my* words" (70). Although the specific referent for the repeated pronoun "it" is unclear within the context of this aside, several options present themselves. "It" could refer to the physical pains associated with her illness since, several lines later, Bearing explains, "I am in terrible pain. . . . Say it, Vivian. *It hurts like hell. It really does*" (70). "It" could also refer to the more general experiences of living with terminal cancer. In that same direct-address aside, for instance, Bearing explains, "Susie says that I need to begin aggressive pain management if I am going to stand it. 'It': such a little word. In this case, I think 'it' signifies 'being alive'" (70). Or "it" could refer to the process of death. All these possible referents have one telling common denominator: sentience. Through the film, then, Bearing seeks "to use [her] words" to express the experiences of terminal cancer, bodily pain, and death.

Ironically, although close attention to textual detail once allowed Bearing to "draw so much from the poems" (48), that same attention to detail now works to complicate her understanding of the body-as-text.<sup>8</sup> From the opening scenes of the film, Edson emphasizes the inapplicability of formalist reading strategies to sentience by highlighting how terminal illness strips language of its traditional meanings and methods of signification. In one scene, for example, Dr. Harvey Kelekian, "chief of medical oncology, University Hospital" (3), explains Bearing's diagnosis while she, only half-attentive, dissects the diagnosis word by word:

KELEKIAN: Now then. You present with a growth that, unfortunately,  
went undetected in stages one, two, and three. Now it is an insidious  
adenocarcinoma, which has spread from the primary adnexal mass—  
VIVIAN: "Insidious"?

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8. In his review of *W;t*, Dr. Abraham Philip offers an alternative reading of how irony functions in the play:

The most awesome irony is that while Vivian Bearing is sterile (emotionally, physiologically, and symbolically)—she never had a love affair, has not given birth or accepted anyone into the essence of her body—she ultimately succumbs to ovarian cancer, a malignancy of a life-giving or renewing organ. (3261)

On the most superficial level this reading does characterize the action of the film—that is, Philip has his facts straight, so to speak. But what disturbs me about this reading is how it so blatantly and unapologetically recapitulates harmful cultural narratives about femininity, the body, and illness (specifically the Camille narrative). Implied in Philip's reading is the suggestion that Bearing's cancer is metaphorically the result of her inability to conform to the "natural" roles prescribed by her sex—that is, an emotional, passive (note Philip's use of a certain passivity of action in the following: "she has never accepted anyone into the essence of her body") mother figure. Although the play does not, this reading that has found its way into the *Journal of the American Medical Association* speaks to the stronghold the Camille narrative continues to have over representations of unruly (here, specifically, intellectual) women and terminal illness.

KELEKIAN: "Insidious" means undetectable at an—

VIVIAN: "Insidious" means treacherous . . . Insidious. Hmm. Curious word choice. Cancer. Cancel. (7–8)

Several lines later, as Kelekian describes the effects of the proposed treatment cycle, Bearing muses: "Antineoplastic. Anti: Against. Neo: new. Plastic. To mold. Shaping. Antineoplastic. Against new shaping" (9). As she did with Donne's poetry, Bearing assumes she can render her terminally ill body intelligible and meaningful through the precise explication of its particulars. She adopts a questioning, analytical stance in relation to her object of scrutiny (i.e., her material body and its health), interrogating Kelekian's word choice and dissecting the complicated medical jargon he employs. Ever the devout New Critic, Bearing in both instances plays with Kelekian's language, mulling over the denotative meanings and etymological origins of specific terms in order to arrive at the "truth" of her condition (namely, the extent of tumor growth and her prognosis).

This detailed explication proves insufficient for explaining the sentient experience of terminal cancer when, in the scene following Kelekian's diagnosis, Bearing "hesitantly" explains to the audience, "I should have asked more questions, because I know there's going to be a test. I have cancer, insidious cancer, with pernicious side effects—no, the *treatment* has pernicious side effects" (12). Interestingly, Bearing here echoes Kelekian's explanation of her diagnosis and treatment almost verbatim, conceding to the very language that she interrogated and contested in the previous scene. When she strays from Kelekian's "script," she quickly corrects herself ("no, the *treatment* has pernicious side effects"), indicating the degree to which the embodied experiences of terminal illness resist (if not annihilate) the expressive language of literary criticism and necessitate the construction of a "less evocative" but "more potent arsenal of terminology" (43–44). Stated differently, Bearing appropriates the language of her oncologist, much as she does in the lecture scene where she explains the words of Donne.

Bearing frequently draws lines connecting literary devices to her medical condition in an effort to discover the "truth" of her sentient experiences, but these parallels too prove insufficient. After the "Grand Rounds" scene, for example, Bearing explains the role that she plays in the medical drama: "I receive chemotherapy, throw up, am subjected to countless indignities, feel better, go home. Eight cycles. Eight neat little strophes. Oh, there have been the usual variations, subplots, red herrings: hepatotoxicity (liver poison), neuropathy (nerve death). (*Righteously*) They are medical terms. I look them up" (41). In this passage Bearing tellingly

likens her "treatment modality" (Kelekian's words, 8) to a "strophe," or "stanza," and compares the side effects of the "chemotherapeutic agent" (again, Kelekian's words, 8) to "subplots." By offering these analogies to literary devices, Bearing emphasizes again her desire "to explain it, to use my words."

However, these analogies to literary devices only illustrate how completely alien Bearing's sentient experiences of terminal cancer are. Like the strophe/stanza, Bearing's "treatment modality" consists of a series, or "recurrent grouping" (Holman and Harmon 454), of individual units (in poetry, verse lines; in oncology, chemotherapy cycles). But whereas in poetry the interaction among various strophes produces unity, coherence, and "truth," in oncology the treatment modalities often lead to a disintegration of unity, coherence, and truth (i.e., health). Herein lies another irony in the film: as Bearing remarks, "My treatment imperils my health" (47). As a side effect of the chemotherapy, Bearing suffers from "[f]ever and neutropenia" (44); in fact, Bearing ultimately succumbs not to the cancer—at least, not directly—but to the liver failure and subsequent cardiac arrest induced by chemotherapy (81). She also endures fierce vomiting spells during which she can only "[moan] and [retch] in agony": "Oh, God— . . . Oh, God. Oh. Oh . . . Oh, God. It can't be . . . Oh, God. Please. Steady. Steady" (32).<sup>9</sup> For Bearing, the "treatment modality" proves to be anything but "neat little strophes," as they subvert their own purpose (making the body healthy) and force the body to overflow its boundaries (through vomiting). Unlike strophes, which provide order and coherence to a poetic text, the chemotherapy cycles render the body-as-text less manageable and understandable, and the analogy ultimately proves ineffectual for explaining to the audience "how it feels."

Edson highlights Bearing's increasing inability to express in her words how cancer "feels" by reducing the intellectual acumen of the direct-address asides, as well as by gradually de-emphasizing the role of those asides as the plot unfolds. As Bearing's pain increases, her attention to semantic detail becomes increasingly less pronounced: "Oh, God, it is so painful. So painful. So much pain. So much pain . . . Am I in pain? I don't believe this. Yes, I'm in goddamn pain. (*Furious*) I have a fever of 101 spiking to 104. And I have bone metastases in my pelvis and both

9. Here, Bearing reverts to the same kind of eruptive emotion evidenced in the "inaccurately punctuated" edition of Donne's poetry mentioned above (in which the translator was prone to "hysterical punctuation"). The implicit parallel that Edson draws between bodily pain and textual inaccuracies signals what Scarry has termed "the unmaking of the world"—that is, how physical pain initiates "an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). In other words, the dissolution of Bearing's literary acumen (i.e., her rigorous standards for objective, non-emotive criticism) mirrors the disintegration of her material body.

femurs. (*Screaming*) There is cancer eating away at my goddamn bones, and I didn't know there could be such pain on this earth" (71). Unlike earlier asides, this outburst does not consist of clever turns of phrase or semantic squabbles; instead, Bearing equivocally repeats the same declaration over and over, "So painful," without specifying the location, extent, or nature of the pain. The comparison between these two very different direct-address asides clearly demonstrates how Bearing's vocabulary over the course of the film "[takes] a turn for the Anglo-Saxon" (32), how words and language once considered her "only defense" (44) lose meaning.

Near the end of the film Edson breaks completely with the asides when Bearing, overwhelmed by pain, relinquishes her role as the I-narrator. In her final spoken lines Bearing "weakly" addresses the audience: "These are my last coherent lines. I'll have to leave the action to the professionals. It came so quickly, after taking so long. Not even time for a proper conclusion" (72). Her lines signal a radical shift in the nature of *W;t*'s narrative—from a story *by* Bearing to a story *about* her. Herein lies a third irony of the film: that a woman who has built her entire professional reputation on the precise usage of language is, in the end, rendered silent. Without words to express the sentient experiences of terminal cancer, and without the physical capacity to endure the tremendous pain, Bearing consents to a large dose of morphine for pain management and eventually slips into a coma from which she will never awaken (72). This shift in narrative strategy startles spectators partly because Bearing "guides" them from the opening lines of the film, and partly because she loses coherence and voice before she can offer a "proper conclusion" (i.e., some "truth" statement about the meaning of life, death, or both).

## Textual Differences

To this point, I have focused on how *W;t* thematically presents the body-in-pain through an analogous relationship between ontology and New Criticism.<sup>10</sup> In the final section of this essay, I want to turn my attention

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10. Edson has commented that at first she was a bit leery of the adaptation, noting, "I thought they would have to jazz it up, add different themes and different places and a car crash" (qtd. in Peyser). Sharing Edson's skepticism was actress Emma Thompson, who was approached by director Mike Nichols to star in and co-author a screenplay version of *W;t*. As Thompson revealed to *Newsweek* reporter Marc Peyser, "It's quite rare that plays work when filmed. They're designed for a different kind of experience." Despite Edson's and Thompson's misgivings, the HBO adaptation of *W;t* has been labeled a "faithful adaptation" of the stage play and has received near-unanimous praise from reviewers. *People Weekly* critic Terry Kelleher dubbed *W;t* "one of the finest

to one noteworthy difference between the stage and screen versions of *W;t*—the final sequence of events that depicts Bearing's death—in order to speak specifically to the cinematic mode.

At the close of the play Edson abandons analogy, opting instead to posit an allegorical narrative by which Bearing's death personifies the Judeo-Christian belief in eternal life and salvation. After Bearing has coded and been pronounced dead,

SUSIE lifts the blanket. VIVIAN steps out of the bed. She walks away from the scene, toward a little light. She is now attentive and eager, moving slowly toward the light. She takes off the cap and lets it drop. She slips off the bracelet. She loosens the ties and the top gown slides to the floor. She lets the second gown fall. The instant she is naked, and beautiful, reaching for the light—Lights out. (85)

What is perhaps most striking about this final sequence of events is Bearing's concession of the narrative-I position, indicated by her silence. The lack of voice accentuates her passive narrative position and indicates how death renders her an object made meaningful. The shedding of her hospital gown visually marks the shedding of illness and bodily pain as well as identifies death as a release from worldly/material suffering (during the disrobing process, Edson describes Bearing as "attentive," "eager," "beautiful"). Death, though, does not simply signify an end to worldly suffering; it also gestures toward the beginning of eternal life and redemption, a point made manifest in Bearing's move toward a white light which symbolizes a spiritual realm, a realm beyond the material one, that gives purpose and meaning to life.

The final sequence of filmic events differs markedly from that of the play. In the film, once Bearing has coded and been pronounced dead, the camera records a long shot of Bearing's hospital room. In the immediate foreground Bearing's lifeless, seminude body is sprawled out across a gurney; in the background Susie stands motionless over Bearing's body, looking down upon her. After lingering over this tableau for a few beats, the camera abruptly shifts perspective, cutting to a bird's-eye view of the gurney. Once again, the camera maintains this shot for a brief moment before cutting to a wide exterior shot of the hospital room, filmed from

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films I've seen in recent years—on big screen or small," citing Thompson's "consummate skill and unshakable commitment" to the role of Bearing as one of the highlights of the film. Similarly, *Variety* reviewer Eddie Cockrell described HBO's adaptation as "[a] shrewd and triumphant retooling of Margaret Edson's 1997 Pulitzer Prize-winning play" and noted that while "[t]he risks in filming such a theatrical experience are enormous," "the original material has been carefully and smartly reworked by Thompson and Nichols."

the adjoining corridor. From this angle spectators see Susie through the closed glass doors leading into Bearing's room; silently but with purpose she closes the drapes. The next cut returns spectators to the interior of the hospital room. This time, however, the camera captures a tight close-up of Bearing's face in death. Her eyes are closed, her head turned slightly to the right, as if in death Bearing avoids the persistent gaze of the camera. Her head is bald, her skin pallid, and her lips parted slightly. Slowly the view cross-fades to a black-and-white, bust-shot photograph of Bearing in life. In the photograph her gaze is firmly directed into the lens of the camera, her expression held between a smirk and a grimace. The only soundtrack that runs beneath this series of cuts and cross-fades is Bearing's voice-over recitation of Donne's Holy Sonnet Six, "Death, be not proud." Immediately following the final lines of the sonnet the screen fades to black and the credits begin to flash.

The final sequence of filmic events clearly suggests that analogy remains the chief tool of *W;t*'s narrative method;<sup>11</sup> indeed, aside from the lecture scene during which Donne's sonnet is visually projected onto

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11. Despite the noteworthy differences between film and play that I outline here, some critics insist on attributing an allegorical narrative to the conclusion of the film. In one particularly scathing, and I would argue ill-informed, review, *Entertainment Weekly* columnist Ken Tucker writes:

I saw the original Off-Broadway production of *Wit* [sic], which starred Kathleen Chalfant in a heroically unsympathetic performance that Thompson has softened. Don't get me wrong—Thompson is excellent—but in reshaping Edson's play, she and Nichols emphasize the element that bothers me about *Wit* [sic]. It's the play's central deviousness: While filled with admiration for Donne's poetry, *Wit* [sic] ultimately says that well-reasoned, ferociously disciplined scholarship is inferior to what one character calls "the meaning-of-life garbage"—that is to say, that Professor Bearing's life would have been less lonely, more full, if she had loved her students as much as her subject. To which I say: Oh, phooey.

Here, Tucker suggests that in reworking the play for the small screen, Thompson and Nichols foregrounded the allegorical narrative deviously undergirding Edson's stage play. As I note above, this reading has been fostered by Edson, who claims that the play is principally about grace and redemption, though few (if any) critics have commented on that fact.

For me, Tucker's statement speaks more to the persistence of allegory as a means to understand texts about terminal illness than it does to the "truth statement" advocated by the film. Indeed, the few moments in the drama when Thompson and Nichols might appear to advocate what Tucker terms "the meaning-of-life garbage" (e.g., when Bearing and Susie share a Popsicle or when Ashford reads *The Runaway Bunny* to Bearing) are undercut by Bearing's simple but telling aside, "That certainly was a *maudlin* display. Popsicles? 'Sweetheart?' I can't believe my life has become so . . . *corny*" (69). A few lines later Bearing admits that such overwrought dramatics "can't be helped" since "[w]e are discussing life and death, and not in the abstract either; we are discussing *my* life and *my* death, and my brain is dulling, and poor Susie's was never very sharp to begin with, and I can't conceive of any other . . . tone" (69). My point here is that, for Bearing, the effusive, existential statement that Tucker attributes to the play is never an option (her "I can't conceive of any other . . . tone" implies a tone other than that engendered by her overweening intellect). Other characters (Susie when she rubs the lotion on the hands of a comatose Bearing) may succumb to the "meaning-of-life garbage," but for Bearing these moments are perhaps unavoidable, but nonetheless "corny."

Bearing's ill body, this scene offers the most explicit comparison of material body/ontology and sonnet/New Criticism. The film's juxtaposition of Bearing's lifeless body with Donne's "Death, be not proud" reinforces the analogy. However, death and the concomitant disappearance of the material body (one variable in the initial analogical equation) necessitate a shift in analogy. In the absence of the material body—an absence visually recorded in the cross-fade from motion picture to still photograph—the conditions of analogy shift from expressed (simile) to implied (metaphor), so that the body is not *like* the sonnet but instead the body *is* the sonnet.

Because the film not only foregrounds literary explication as its central thematic and narrative concern but also advocates that methodology for its readers, to explicate the body-in-pain spectators must employ the same reading practices Bearing uses when she interprets Donne's Holy Sonnets. The central presupposition of New Critics is that every "good" poem must achieve "organic unity," defined as "the concept that all parts of a poem are interrelated and interconnected, with each part reflecting and helping to support the poem's central idea" (Bressler 43). In "The Formalist Critics," for example, Cleanth Brooks articulates some "articles of faith" that guide and direct the work of formalist critics, chief among them being "the problem of unity—the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole" (52). To achieve organic unity, the critic must identify the central tension in a poem and then, by exploring particular devices of irony, paradox, and wit through which that tension is conveyed, the critic must resolve the tension and arrive at a statement of the poem's chief effect.

I contend that the central tension in *W;t* is expressed through the antithetical relationship between physical pain and its representations. On one hand, pain (to paraphrase Scarry) has no voice because it is located within the invisible (and unknowable) terrain of the material body; on the other hand, representation foregrounds the voice as one central device through which meaning is produced. This struggle between voice and silence perhaps is most succinctly articulated in the epigraph that opens this essay. For Bearing, who has built her professional career on a precise and judicious application of language, the experience of terminal cancer and its radical medical treatment is devastating because those experiences are, as Scarry claims, "world-destroying" (29). Bearing's unbearable pain compromises her ability to translate experience into language, a point underscored by the repetition of ellipses in the epigraph. Like her students who struggle with close textual analysis, Bearing "flounders" (48) in her attempt to express what pain feels like.



The film sustains this narrative tension in the final scene through the persistence of asides. As a narrative convention, the aside presupposes a certain degree of agency. As Kaja Silverman explains in *The Acoustic Mirror*, “Western metaphysics has fostered the illusion that speech is able to express the speaker’s inner essence, that it is ‘part’ of him or her. It locates the subject of speech in the same ontological space as the speaking subject, so that the former seems a natural outgrowth of the latter” (43). Typically, the act of speaking (i.e., the narrative-I) confers upon an individual the status of “subject.” The voice is, in this way, identified as the central locus for the production of both identity and subjectivity, and the realization/execution of that voice is assumed (by the individual and those with whom that individual engages) to be evidence of the individual’s subject status. Thus the I-subject of the speech and the I-as-point-of-view speaking subject are conflated, or, in Silverman’s parlance, are located in “the same ontological space.” Direct-address asides emphasize this process of conflation so that Bearing’s recitation of “Death, be not proud” projects the body-in-pain/-death as a speaking subject.

At the same time, several additional aspects of the mode of address undercut the sense of agency implied by Bearing’s direct-address asides. This final aside is spoken posthumously, and death, as Bronfen persuasively argues, typically effaces “the subjectivity of the dying woman, her position within the death process, her body, and her pain” (49–50). In addition, the recitation is framed by the objective rather than the subjective/nominative case. By speaking Donne’s words, Bearing marks her body as an object to which something is don(n)e, as a text to be read. Through careful instruction and rigorous example, Bearing aids and abets spectators in reading the body, but she herself retains little power over the outcome of the interpretive process or her medical treatment. Note, for instance, her dismay at “leav[ing] the action to the professionals” without “even time for a proper conclusion” (72).

The use of portrait photography in the final moments of the film visually underscores the oscillation between subject and object. On one hand, the photograph produces a fixed visual record of the material body, one framed in space by the ocular perspective of the photographer and one framed in time by the present progressive tense of the shutter’s click. The spatial and temporal fixity of the photograph places in relief the literal death and disappearance of Bearing’s material body; in other words, the permanence of the former sharply contrasts with the provisionality of the latter. On the other hand, photography manufactures presence as an endlessly reproducible visual image of the material body. Through the process of cropping, photographic negatives can be framed and reframed to



accentuate a particular bodily feature or to emphasize a unique camera angle. By manipulating light and shadow during the developing process, the photographer can (sometimes radically) alter the visual composition of a negative, and digital enhancement can modify the photographic image. Thus the "reproductive possibilities of photography" (Phelan 38) suggest that the process of signification, of meaning making, does not presuppose a one-to-one correlation between signifier and signified. Even in the absence of the material body (signified), the photograph (signifier) continues to re-produce Bearing's body as a meaningful text-to-be-read.

Formalist approaches to literature insist that narrative tensions must be both explicated *and* resolved (several times throughout the film Bearing and Ashford claim that their methodology produces meaning as Truth); however, I argue that *W;t* presents an unresolvable tension. To suggest that the narrative tension in *W;t* is left unresolved, though, is neither an uncritical reiteration of Scarry's and Bronfen's theses nor a nihilistic proposition of my own (i.e., pain can never be translated into representation). Rather, I suggest that the film constitutes an exercise in wit, one in which representational (rather than metaphysical) quandaries are posed but never resolved. In this respect the film calls attention to itself as a form of representation that is doomed to fail in its address (given its subject matter: pain and the treatment of terminal cancer), but one that can nonetheless chart the struggles within its mode of address that derive from any attempt to document the ravages that terminal illness exacts upon the material body.

From the initial scenes of the film, Edson calls attention to the cinematic apparatus not simply as a vehicle through which to convey the story, but rather as a force that shapes the action. In her first aside Bearing apologetically notes, "It's not my intention to give away the plot; but I think I die at the end" (6). Later in this same aside Bearing reveals, "I've got less than two hours. Then: curtain" (7). Similarly self-reflexive comments recur throughout the film, such as when Bearing refers to her hospital gown as a "costume" (6), designates flashback sequences as "scenes" (63), and challenges the absent author (Edson) by noting, "If I were writing this scene, it would last a full fifteen minutes. I would lie here, and you would sit there" (35). By foregrounding the operations of the dramatic and then the cinematic apparatus, Edson effectively disallows an empathetic bond between spectators and character. In effect, spectators' attention is divided between the unfolding narrative and its self-reflexive construction. If spectators are made aware of the operations of the cinematic apparatus, then they also are made aware of their own situatedness as onlookers of the drama. But, given the nature of Bearing's profession (teaching) and given

the shape of *W;t*'s plot (much of it reads like a lecture in seventeenth-century poetry and New Critical explication),<sup>12</sup> spectators are not simply voyeurs but rather students, and *W;t* constitutes the final exam.

## Conclusion

*W;t* challenges traditional theories of the body-in-pain which suggest that the two primary means of representing the felt-experiences of pain are the weapon (or causal agent— cancer) and the damage (or effects/ wounds—vomiting, nerve death, liver damage). Indeed, the final scene of the film invokes neither the weapon (since cancer is an internal medical condition that happens at the microscopic level of cellular activity) nor its damage (since the camera refuses to linger over Bearing's corpse). Rather, it proposes a third means of representation, one that locates itself precisely within the moment that pain is inflicted and death is experienced. In the film the cinematic apparatus provides a multitude of possibilities for how to represent the body-in-pain, just as New Criticism provides a multitude of tools for rendering the poetic text meaningful. The text provides a cautionary note: when the focus of the representation is misdirected (on either the weapon or the damage), the body-in-pain remains untranslated and sentience remains unsharable. And while analogy ultimately fails to convey to spectators what it "feels like" to be terminally ill and to receive radical and invasive medical treatment, the self-reflexive analogy in *W;t* more directly acknowledges the failure to produce meaning, knowledge, and Truth than does allegory.

The film also challenges the traditional ways in which the patient (especially the female patient) is codified and contained within medical discourse (itself a specific mode of representation) and rendered an object of the (usually male) physician's gaze.<sup>13</sup> Bearing's lifeless body, then, sig-

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12. Edson herself describes *W;t* as "90 minutes of suffering and death, mitigated by a pelvic exam and a lecture on 17th-century poetry" (Zinman 25).

13. Outside theatre circles, *W;t* has captured the attention of medical practitioners for its relentless and "deft satire of doctors, who are depicted as concerned but detached, viewing their patient more as a scientific case study than as a person" (Hornby 297). In fact, it is precisely Edson's cogent critique of palliative care that has prompted a number of this country's top medical schools to use *W;t* as a teaching tool for residents and interns. As Marianne Szegegy-Maszak explains in her article "A Lesson Before Dying": "At 30 of the top U.S. medical schools, the play is performed as part of a broader national effort to teach medical students—and their professors—that the heroic saving of life is only half their job. The other half is dealing with the dying when a cure proves impossible" (48).

For more responses to the play from the medical community, see: M. J. Friedrich, "Wit: A Play That Raises Issues," 1611–12; Suzanne Gordon, "Viewpoint," 9; Dr. Abraham Philip, "Cancer

nals the ways in which illness and the representational forms of illness render the patient an "unwitting accomplice" in her treatment and return to health.<sup>14</sup>

Edson suggests that one need not hide from the inherent failures of representation, but rather should acknowledge them. *W;t*'s chief effect is simple. Suspiciously simple. At the close of the film, spectators perhaps want (or need) further clarification. But it is too late. Like Bearing, the audience has run out of time and the cinematic encounter is over. The final image of the still photograph of Bearing, whose insistent gaze bears down at viewers, questions what audience members have "learned." The final exam is over; to wit: time's up.

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Patient," 3261.

14. Through the explicit display of the female body, the final image of the film also gestures toward the ways in which gender socialization renders the female body a shameful terrain that must be hidden behind both clothing and euphemism—that is, the way in which biological processes that are unique to women (e.g., ovulation, menstruation, conception, menopause) are consistently and unwaveringly linked to the "failure and dissolution" of the material body (Martin 32). It is precisely this history of shame that often compromises women's health care, leaving many maladies (especially those centered on "taboo" areas such as the breasts and vagina) undetected until they are too advanced to treat.

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