Locating Breast Cancer

At the beginning of Cancer: Through the Eyes of Ten Women, Cathy Read records that in 1980, worldwide, breast cancer killed 560,000 women. In the introduction to her 1999 anthology Living On the Margins: Women Writers on Breast Cancer, Hilda Raz relates that ‘every three minutes in the United States another woman is diagnosed with breast cancer’, and that ‘One third’ of those diagnosed ‘will die of the disease’. ‘In terms of new cases’, writes the British physician Nicholas James in 2011, ‘breast cancer is the commonest cancer in women, accounting for 21% of female cancer cases and 14% of female cancer deaths worldwide.’ However it is configured, the incidence of breast cancer is startling, despite efforts to improve detection rates, and therefore survival rates, through increased levels of screening and public awareness: examples of the latter include the pink ribbon (and the association of the colour pink with breast cancer), the observing of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month in many countries, and the work done by organizations including Breast Cancer Action (founded in 1990) and The National Breast Cancer Coalition (founded in 1991).

Like many cancers, breast cancer does not always clearly present itself to the external world, and considering breast cancer literature involves thinking about the relationship between internal and external. Breast cancer treatment can include lumpectomy, mastectomy, and the removal of lymph nodes (frequently in the armpit), all things that extract from the body, while chemotherapy involves the ingestion of toxins, and radiotherapy the exposure to or absorption of ionizing radiation. Treatment involves not only physical positionings, but also psychological and emotional adjustment, so even if they do not attempt to represent carcinoma, breast cancer poets do present the effects of the disease on their psychological and social landscape. This
Cancer Poetry

is not a lightly used metaphor: with lumpectomy and mastectomy, there is a literal, physical change, which is difficult enough to come to terms with personally; but breast cancer is a more complex case due to its effects’ greater visibility. Breast cancer is located inside the body, but within something externally visible: it is very difficult to keep the disease private. In addition to its physical status, the breast also has a great metaphysical importance in its position as a cultural signifier. Of one of the most visible signs of breast cancer, mastectomy, Raz writes in Living On the Margins that everyone ‘knows this amputation is different from others’, that the breast is ‘an erotic, sexual, and maternal emblem in a culture that reveres breasts if not women.’

Such a signifier can be indicative of the unequal consequences of particular cancers: a man’s experience of testicular cancer and orchiectomy, for instance, may carry a similarly acute sense of identity loss, but perhaps with less anxiety over constant visibility and identity judgements based on appearance.

In this way, breast cancer patients, and breast cancer poets, may be particularly conscious of the relationship between internal and external, exposure and isolation. In addition to the physical pain of surgery, a poem by the American poet Lucille Clifton suggests the psychological distress involved in breast cancer treatment: ‘lumpectomy eve’ begins by describing how throughout the night the poet dreams of the baby lips ‘that nursed and nursed / and the lonely nipple’. The isolation intrinsic to the figure suggests the anguish involved in adjusting to the new physical reality, and the coldness of tender memories invested in the physical suddenly being cut away. Part of Clifton’s psychological adjustment involves reconciling with the painful irony of something nourishing become damaging, but the breast is also used as a metonym of a wider identity, in the fear that the whole woman may now be marginalized. In her introduction to Living On the Margins, Raz goes on to write that

A woman is her body. Cancer that threatens the breast, the marker of gender and the maternal, the female erotic and aesthetic, may also threaten traditional definitions of identity, as many men with breast cancer may attest.

Raz may be a little too reductive here, but her essential point is echoed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her 1991 lecture ‘White Glasses’, where she writes that breast cancer ‘makes its own demands of a new politics, a new identity formation’, and this involves a great many unsettling questions. During and after treatment, how exactly do breast cancer patients reposition themselves in relation to the altered landscape of