
Introduction: Last Looks, Last Books

There is a custom in Ireland called “taking the last look.” When you find yourself bedridden, with death approaching, you rouse yourself with effort and, for the last time, make the rounds of your territory, North, East, South, West, as you contemplate the places and things that have constituted your life. After this last task, you can return to your bed and die. W. B. Yeats recalls in letters how his friend Lady Gregory, dying of breast cancer, performed her version of the last look. Although for months she had remained upstairs in her bedroom, three days before she died she arose from her chair—she had refused to take to her bed—and painfully descended the stairs, making a final circuit of the downstairs rooms before returning upstairs and finally allowing herself to lie down. And Yeats himself, a few years later, took his last look in a sonnet called “Meru,” which cast a final glance over all his cultural territory: “Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!”

In many lyrics, poets have taken, if not a last look, a very late look at the interface at which death meets life, and my topic is the strange binocular style they must invent to render the reality contemplated in that last look. The poet, still alive but aware of the imminence of death, wishes to enact that deeply shadowed but still vividly alert moment; but how can the manner of a poem do justice to both the looming presence of death and the unabated vitality of spirit? Although death is a frequent theme in European literature, any response to it used to be for-

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tified by the belief in a personal afterlife. Yet as the conviction of the soul's afterlife waned, poets had to invent what Wallace Stevens called "the mythology of modern death." In the pages that follow, I take the theme of death and the genre of elegy as given and focus instead on the problem of style in poems confronting not death in general, nor the death of someone else, but personal extinction. I draw my chief examples of such poetry from the last books of some modern American poets: Wallace Stevens, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Merrill. The last books of other American poets—John Berryman, A. R. Ammons—could equally well have been chosen, but the poems I cite illustrate with particular distinction both the rewards and the hazards of presenting life and death as mutually, and demandingly, real within a single poem's symbolic system.

Before I come to describe pre-modern practice in such poems, I want to illustrate very briefly in two poets, Stevens and Merrill, what I mean by "the problem of style" in a poem that wishes to be equally fair to both life and death at once. Both poets show style as powerfully diverted from expected norms by the stress of approaching death. The first of these poems is by Wallace Stevens, and it is called "The Hermitage at the Center." (Even its title is baffling; the poem has no hermitage and no hermit, at least at first glance):

THE HERMITAGE AT THE CENTER

The leaves on the macadam make a noise—
 How soft the grass on which the desired
 Reclines in the temperature of heaven—

Like tales that were told the day before yesterday—
 Sleek in a natural nakedness,
 She attends the tintinnabula—

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And the wind sways like a great thing tottering—
Of birds called up by more than the sun,
Birds of more wit, that substitute—

Which suddenly is all dissolved and gone—
Their intelligible twittering
For unintelligible thought.

And yet this end and this beginning are one,
And one last look at the ducks is a look
At lucent children round her in a ring.¹

Stevens has here presented a poem that seems unintelligible as one reads it line by line. It contains, as we eventually realize, two poems that have been interdigitated—one of death, one of life, converging in a joint coda. The first poem—that of death, of seasonal end, of unintelligible extinction—can be seen by reading in succession the opening lines of the first four tercets:

The leaves on the macadam make a noise
Like tales that were told the day before yesterday,
And the wind sways like a great thing tottering,
Which suddenly is all dissolved and gone.

The second poem—that of love, of inception, of the intelligibility implicit in song—can be seen by reading in succession the latter two lines of the first four tercets, which describe the ever-recurrent appearance in nature (and in human nature) of spring, sexuality, warmth, birdsong, love, and children:

How soft the grass on which the desired
Reclines in the temperature of heaven;
Sleek in a natural nakedness,
She attends the tintinnabula
Of birds called up by more than the sun,

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Birds of more wit, that substitute
 Their intelligible twittering
 For unintelligible thought.

The coda, declaring the overlap of the two previous poems, memorializes Stevens's daily walk to work through Hartford's Elizabeth Park, with its duck pond. Stevens takes his last look at his favorite place and sees spring:

And yet this end and this beginning are one,
 And one last look at the ducks is a look
 At lucent children round her in a ring.

As the poet wonders how to render not only his own unintelligible physical tottering, creative depletion, and expected dissolution but also the soft grass, the little ducklings, and the intelligible presence of a reposing Primavera, he feels that both are equally true, and must be simultaneously held in a binocular frame in which neither can obliterate or dominate the other. He is the hermit, now without a beloved, meditating in his ascetic hermitage as he slips toward death; but he does not allow himself to deny the beautiful, desirable, erotic, and fertile spring that assuages him even as he loses it. What he decides to reproduce in the style of his poem is the unintelligibility presented to us by death, which forces us to sort out the conflicting but coordinate pieces of our perceptions and thoughts. Yet even the unintelligible-when-first-read "Hermitage" reveals, stanza by stanza, a fixed pattern of recursive intelligibility when understood, reinforcing the claim for the ultimately "intelligible twittering" of the poetic mind.

A comparably strong distortion of form in the service of a binocular gaze appears in the very late poem by James Merrill called "Christmas Tree."²

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CHRISTMAS TREE

To be
 Brought down at last
 From the cold sighing mountain
 Where I and the others
 Had been fed, looked after, kept still,
 Meant, I knew—of course I knew—
 That it would be only a matter of weeks,
 That there was nothing more to do.
 Warmly they took me in, made much of me,
 The point from the start was to keep my spirits up.
 I could assent to that. For honestly,
 It did help to be wound in jewels, to send
 Their colors flashing forth from vents in the deep
 Fragrant sable that cloaked me head to foot.
 Over me then they wove a spell of shining—
 Purple and silver chains, eavesdripping tinsel,
 Amulets, milagros: software of silver,
 A heart, a little girl, a Model T,
 Two staring eyes. The angels, trumpets, BUD and BEA
 (The children's names) in clownlike capitals,
 Somewhere a music box whose tiny song
 Played and replayed I ended before long
 By loving. And in shadow behind me, a primitive IV
 To keep the show going. Yes, yes, what lay ahead
 Was clear: the stripping, the cold street, my chemicals
 Plowed back into Earth for lives to come—
 No doubt a blessing, a harvest, but one that doesn't bear,
 Now or ever, dwelling upon. To have grown so thin.
 Needles and bone. The little boy's hands meeting
 About my spine. The mother's voice: *Holding up wonderfully!*

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No dread. No bitterness. The end beginning. Today's
 Dusk room aglow
 For the last time
 With candlelight.
 Faces love lit,
 Gifts underfoot.
 Still to be so poised, so
 Receptive. Still to recall, to praise.

I will return to "Christmas Tree" in the final chapter of this book, but for now I simply want to describe this as a work in the immemorial tradition of the shaped poem. It is a Christmas tree missing its left half. The forest tree is already dead, because it has previously been cut down. But in the house, it gives every appearance, with its still-green needles, of being alive and even of being more beautiful than before, feeling the warmth brought to its ornamented presence by the pleasure of the children regarding it. Merrill—already fatally ill with AIDS, but still wholly alive in spirit—invents his Christmas tree, half ghost, half evergreen, as a symbolic expression of that late binocular style which is my subject.

I hope to give perspective to these modern attempts (and others that I will take up in later chapters) by looking back at how older poets (who still imagined another world beyond this one) found a style adequate to the interface of death and life. Not all the poems I mention were written by poets at the brink of death, but they all confront the difficulty of representing, within the active horizon of life, the onset of death at that moment when, as Coleridge writes, "like strangers shelt'ring from a storm, / Hope and Despair meet in the porch of Death" ("Constancy to an Ideal Object"). How to depict that meeting within a sustained binocular view preoccupies any poet treating the supervening of death on life. We find Emily Dickinson,

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for instance, situating in a closed carriage the meeting of human Hope (first) and Despair (ultimately) with Death. As the poet enters, she says confidently—with, one might say, a hopeful monocular view—that the carriage contains, besides herself and her gentleman escort Death, an entity that she calls “Immortality”:

Because I could not stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me -
The Carriage held but just Ourselves -
And Immortality.

But when the carriage ultimately stops at her grave, Dickinson suspects a less certain future for herself than “Immortality,” and, turning her view into a binocular one, substitutes for “Immortality” a quite different and impersonal abstract noun, “Eternity”:

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity - ³

That faceless and nameless “Eternity” is infinitely far from the hopeful personal “Immortality” promised by Dickinson’s childhood Christianity; and the two abstract nouns, so similar in form and so different in meaning, face each other in a dark intellectual space, guaranteeing our realization of Dickinson’s two proposals: one of individual everlasting life, and the other of featureless and blank “Eternity.”

In another instance of how a binocular vision may be expressed, George Herbert (1593–1633), in “Death” (a poem to be seen more closely later), presents the riddling interface of life and death by contemplating, like Hamlet, a skull. Because to Herbert the open mouth of the living body signified song,

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(with its unruly passions) than by the unbodied soul (who is, as *anima*, female). Weighing his present painful physical blindness against a past mental blindness to heavenly realities, Waller shows stoic resolve:

When we for Age could neither read nor write,
 The Subject made us able to indite.
 The Soul, with Nobler Resolutions deckt,
 The Body stooping, does Herself erect:
 No Mortal Parts are requisite to raise
 Her, that Unbody'd can her Maker praise.

The Seas are quiet, when the Winds give o'er,
 So calm are we, when Passions are no more:
 For then we know how vain it was to boast
 Of fleeting Things, so certain to be lost.
 Clouds of Affection from our younger Eyes
 Conceal that emptiness, which Age descries.

The Soul's dark Cottage, batter'd and decay'd,
 Lets in new Light thrô chinks that time has made;
 Stronger by weakness, wiser Men become
 As they draw near to their Eternal home:
 Leaving the Old, both Worlds at once they view,
 That stand upon the Threshold of the New.

—*Miratur Limen Olympi*, Virgil⁵

Because Waller, remembering the Virgilian threshold of Olympus, is convinced that “The Soul’s dark Cottage . . . / Lets in new Light thrô chinks that time has made,” he needs to make real to us both bodily darkness and spiritual light. His first sestet conveys the physical darkness: we hear that the poet can neither read nor write, and that his body is stooping. By the second sestet, the great initial effort required to erect the soul and “indite” under the condition of blindness has subsided into a reflection on the calming of the passions. There is no

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compensatory light as yet, but the poet has begun to reconsider his present blindness—was he not more blind earlier in life, when passion’s “clouds of affection” concealed from his eyes the emptiness of worldly “fleeting things”? By the third sestet, a sustaining spiritual illumination arrives, not through the eyes but—in an arresting and poignant metaphor—through the very wounds suffered by the “batter’d and decay’d” body. (The adjectives illustrate the double plight of trauma and age.) Successively opened “chinks” take over the function of the lost eyes, and the rays of a hitherto unknown light are thereby enabled, through trauma, to penetrate the “dark cottage” of mortality. As the soul prepares to cross the threshold dividing earth from heaven, her illumination gradually increases until, paradoxically stronger in weakness and wiser in blindness, she sees herself approaching the source of light, a whole new world.

Or so it would be if the poem had been written in the first-person singular. But we perceive that Waller has begun in the first-person plural (extending his poem to all of us in our last days) and that he has, unexpectedly, spoken of his soul and his body in third-person abstraction—“the Soul,” “the Body”—as though he were already beginning to detach himself from them as they prepare to detach themselves from one another. By the time of the third stanza, all reference is voiced in the third-person plural: “men” become stronger and wiser, and “they” view two worlds at once. Waller cannot as yet join such men on the preparatory threshold of death; he is still alive. But he is old enough, and blind enough, to say, in the present tense of old age, that men become, by their newly admitted spiritual light, stronger and wiser as they “draw near to their Eternal home.” Nothing any longer is “fleeting”—all worldly attractions have fled for good. The effect of balance in the last two lines, as the

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poet imagines a momentary pause on the journey “home,” depends on his creating for us, by means of style, that threshold on which the soul will stand. The main affirmation of the close—“both Worlds at once they view”—is poised evenly between “Leaving the Old” and “the Threshold of the New,” while the “old” of departure becomes incorporated into the “threshold” of anticipation. And in this truly binocular vision, the free-standing adjective “New,” closing the poem and predicated of the celestial World, is ratified by its echo of the earlier phrase “new Light,” which evoked the soul’s first glimpse, within its “dark Cottage,” of the rays of heaven.

Wallace Stevens’s elegy for George Santayana, “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” enables us to see Waller’s poem resonating, but changed, within modern writing. Stevens borrows Waller’s Virgilian image of the “threshold” for the interface of life and death. But Stevens cannot echo Waller’s confidence in a “new World” beyond that threshold and must create a different binocular view of Santayana’s death and life. Stevens begins in Waller’s vein, speaking of Santayana, still alive in Rome, as being poised “on the threshold of heaven,” but the modern poet conceives heaven in a secular fashion—as the full realization, in time, of what we have seen, desired, and created in life. Stevens asserts that “the threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome / Beyond” are “alike in the make of the mind”:

It is as if in a human dignity
Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

Santayana, Stevens continues, is “a citizen of heaven though still of Rome.” At the moment of death, it is Santayana’s life-long creation, his edifice of thought, that becomes, in Stevens’s view, a final architecture of “total grandeur at the end.” Santay-

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ana, through his philosophical imagination, inhabits the “total grandeur of a total edifice”:

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
 Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
 For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
 As if the design of all his words takes form
 And frame from thinking and is realized.

If we try to think of an alternative way in which Waller might have imagined his last days, we could conceive of his staging “Of the Last Verses” as a gradual and fulfilling chronological pilgrimage during which the soul, at first full of youthful passions, journeys downward into the sadness and blindness of age until, facing the threshold of eternity, it becomes aware that its suffering has enabled it to see celestial light and, at the end, the new World from which the light issues. But that linear teleological advance would have minimized the poet’s actual state at the time of writing—he is stooping, blind, afflicted, inhabiting a “batter’d cottage.” We are eventually permitted to feel the vitality-within-decay of the new light, made so physically real by the painful “chinks” through which it penetrates, but at the same time we encounter, even on the threshold of eternal light, the weak and hampered state of the poet’s body. Waller sums up his binocular view in the phrase “stronger by weakness,” which by its paradoxical style asserts the inextricability, at the interface of life and death, of bodily failure and spiritual strength. Stevens, too, for all the grandeur he ascribes to Santayana, makes us feel the body’s decline as he pleads with Santayana to articulate for us the nature of modern death. Like Waller, Stevens imagines a paradoxical grandeur found only in misery and ruin. Addressing Santayana, Stevens describes him as

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Impatient for the grandeur that you need
 In so much misery; and yet finding it
 Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,
 Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead.

Other convincing transmutations of Christian elegy by modern poets will appear later in this book. But now I turn back from Stevens's echoing of Waller's threshold and the pain preceding it to my second example of the style of Christian poets who delineate the state of living in the face of death while expecting a future in heaven. John Donne's self-elegy "A Hymn to God My God, in My Sickness" reveals that Donne, terrified at the actuality of death, adopts as his first strategy an attempt to deny as much as possible a truly binocular view, emphasizing instead a stereoscopic assimilation of the fearful unknown reaches of death to the known dimensions of life. The poet's sickroom becomes, by this will to similarity, an antechamber to God's holy room; his present music is, he says, the same as the music he will play, or become, in heaven; and what he here enacts in thought, he will in heaven carry out in action. His assimilations then become geographical ones: by comparing his body to a flat map, he makes his West his East, his death his resurrection, and his journey to the afterlife a project comparable to the earthly journeys of famous travelers, from Magellan to Marco Polo. Even when Donne turns away from these witty coercive analogies to engage in direct prayer, he is intent on a form of metaphorical religious assimilation, conflating the place of joy (Paradise) with the place of pain (Calvary), metamorphosing one crown (Christ's crown of thorns) into another (his own crown of salvation), assuring himself that one bodily fluid (the sweat of Adam's brow, reproduced by his own fever) will be redeemed by another such fluid (Christ's blood). In

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Donne's final assimilation of there to here, he makes himself—the famous preacher of sermons in Saint Paul's—both the officiant at his own funeral and the audience to his own consolatory but minatory sermon.

Donne's palpable stylistic effort to fuse into a single image each set of opposite states is made in the interest of obscuring the enormous difference between sickroom and God's room, death and eternal life, earthly journeys and spiritual ones, preaching in public and praying on one's deathbed. (In the event, Donne recovered from the sickness that precipitated "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse"; nevertheless, the poem arises from his conviction that he is in the last moments of life, about to enter the precincts of death.) Here is this conspicuously assimilative poem, whose strategy of denial of difference breaks down only in its closing line:

HYMNE TO GOD MY GOD, IN MY SICKNESSE

Since I am comming to that Holy roome,
 Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,
 I shall be made thy Musique; As I come
 I tune the Instrument here at the dore,
 And what I must doe then, thinke here before.

Whilst my Physitians by their love are growne
 Cosmographers, and I their Mapp, who lie
 Flat on this bed, that by them may be showne
 That this is my South-west discoverie
Per fretum febris, by these straits to die,

I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;
 For, though their currants yeeld returne to none,
 What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
 In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,
 So death doth touch the Resurrection.

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Is the Pacifique Sea my home? Or are
 The Easterne riches? Is *Jerusalem*?
Anyan, and *Magellan*, and *Gibraltar*,
 All straits, and none but straits are wayes to them,
 Whether where *Japhet* dwelt, or *Cham*, or *Sem*.

We thinke that *Paradise* and *Calvarie*,
Christs Crosse, and *Adams tree*, stood in one place;
 Looke Lord, and finde both *Adams* met in me;
 As the first *Adams* sweat surrounds my face,
 May the last *Adams* blood my soule embrace.

So, in his purple wrapp'd receive mee Lord,
 By these his thornes give me his other Crowne;
 And as to others soules I preach'd thy word,
 Be this my Text, my Sermon to mine owne,
 Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down.⁶

After all the insistent assimilating of the unknown future side of the interface, that of death, to the known present side, that of life, the final text of Donne's sermon to himself comes as a shock. In it he sharply distinguishes—for the first time in the poem—the two sides of the interface, now admitting that being thrown down into death must precede being raised into immortality. He borrows here from Psalm 102:9–10, in which the psalmist contrasts his former state—being lifted up by God—with his present one, in which he has been cast down:

For I have eaten ashes like bread,
 and mingled my drink with weeping,
 Because of thine indignation and thy wrath;
 for thou has lifted me up, and cast me down.

Donne reverses the psalmist's order: he is now cast down and wants God to raise him up. He still retains, at the end, a trace

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of his former will to assimilation; he links the two opposite states by making “raise” the intended effect of “throws down” and by ascribing both equally to God’s agency. The crucial final-line “text” of Donne’s self-sermon gains additional significance not only by its scriptural source and epigrammatic closing function but also by its rhetorical difference—as a direct-address homily to the poet’s own soul—from the speech act of prayer to God, which otherwise organizes the whole hymn.

The striking isolation of this final line leads us to a backward glance at the rhyme scheme (*ababb*) of Donne’s stanza. Given its rhymes, the stanza “ought” to end after its fourth line, when its rhyme is “completed,” *abab*. In stanzas 1, 2, and 4, confirming such an intuition, the fifth line is syntactically supplementary rather than essential; in stanzas 3 and 5, however, the fifth line is necessary to the sense and thereby justifies its existence. But the closing line of the final stanza, although essential, is a cited text rather than a personal narration. The personal supplicatory voice of the dying Donne, insisting on his imaginative conflation of unknown death and known life, has disappeared, vanquished by the undeniable Pauline axiom that whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth; whom he wishes to raise, he throws down. There is, then, no seamless and facile assimilative passage, as the poet had hoped, from life to death. Donne struggles so hard against the actual binocular vision that would admit cleanly the two distinct aspects, mortal and immortal, of the last look, that his final collapse into an admission of the utter duality between affliction and resurrection sets into distinct stylistic relief his earlier determination to make the afterlife appear a smooth analogue to living.

We have seen that in “Hymne to God my God, in my sickness,” Donne has employed a form of palimpsest (a new text

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written over a former incompletely erased one), consistently easing the fear of death by superimposing a “heavenly” image (“God’s holy room”) on an actual earthly one (the sickroom), the East of resurrection over the West of mortal illness. In Donne’s other great poem of death, “A Hymne to God the Father,” we find that the figure blurring the sharp interface of continuing life and imminent death is again that of the palimpsest. This time, however, it is a figure not of images but of words, in which a single word or phrase is reinscribed over itself. Each of the three six-line stanzas of the “Hymne” is generated by the reiterated words “done” and “more,” and the first two stanzas begin “Wilt thou forgive that sin . . . ?” By this repetition we are made to realize that all the stanzas are variants of a single underlying template, that of confession, with Donne as the penitent and God as the confessor. The penitent rehearses, in the course of the poem, several varieties of sin—“that sin where I begun,” “that sin, through which I run,” “that sin by which I have won / Others to sin,” and “that sin which I did shun”—all of them singularly unspecified, as though God were already aware of the particulars of Donne’s former faults that have generated these vague categories. Here are Donne’s first two stanzas, reinscribing “Wilt thou forgive that sin” and inaugurating the immobile rhymes that create the superposition of successive sins, past and present:

I.

Wilt thou forgive that sinne where I begunne,
 Which is my sin, though it were done before?
 Wilt thou forgive that sinne, through which I runne,
 And do run still: though still I do deplore?
 When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
 For, I have more.

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II.

Wilt thou forgive that sinne by which I have wonne
 Others to sinne? and, made my sinne their doore?
 Wilt thou forgive that sinne which I did shunne
 A yeare, or two: but wallowed in, a score?
 When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
 For I have more.

The third version inscribed on the template of confession will end the poem, which until this point has been playing with five tenses: the future (“Wilt thou forgive”); the present (“which is my sin”); the present perfect (“by which I have won”); the imperfect (“wallowed in a score”); and the future perfect (“When thou hast done”—the equivalent of “when you will have forgiven all those”). By phrasing the future perfect as though it were the present perfect (“When thou hast done”), Donne suspends his poem in an uncertain moment—that of a hoped-for future represented as though it has already happened.

Because the third version of the confession must maintain the unswerving template rhymes on “done” and “more,” it must resemble its predecessors; but since it has to resolve the poem, it must differ from them. In the closing stanza, Donne for the first time makes a confession in which he specifies his sin: “I have a sin of feare.” And for the first time he envisages a future not God’s (“Wilt thou forgive”) but his own—a future of damnation where he may “perish on the shore.” Because he has—with the word “perish”—at last admitted the abyss separating death from life, he can banish all his tense-splitting and look to a different model of hope, not that of tensed time but that of the untensed eternity of the resplendent son of God:

III.

I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne
 My last thred, I shall perish on the shore;

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But swear by thy selfe, that at my death thy sonne
 Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
 And, having done that, Thou haste done,
 I feare no more.

Donne has resolved his earlier uneasy slippage among tenses by directing his last look at the perpetual presence of the Son/Sun, who “shall shine” (at the death to come) as he “shines now” (in the poet’s present) and as he shone “heretofore” (in the past). The poet’s death, in consequence, is no longer envisaged within a temporal continuum of uncertain hope or terrified fear, but is absorbed within the timelessness of providential redemption. Through his emphasis on tenses, Donne demonstrates stylistically the anxiety which seeks to obscure the distinction between death and life; that anxiety flitters between the present, the recent past, the continuous past, the ancestral past (evoked by “heretofore”), the future, and the future perfect. Anxious ourselves under the flurry of Donne’s constantly changing tenses, we are relieved when Donne turns his gaze from time to eternity, at last making God’s sworn “done” match the fate of “Donne.” The normal human resistance to contemplating the unimaginable fissure between life and death generates, in Donne’s aggressively visible manner, the manufacture of a confusing multiplicity of times until, in the third stanza, the poet can, by finally admitting the danger of perishing on death’s “shore,” forsake body-time in favor of soul-time and end his poem.

George Herbert could not be more different from Donne in the strategy he adopts when depicting the encounter of life and death. While Donne strove to allay anxiety by assimilating one state to the other, Herbert, in “Death,” is so deeply intent on drawing the ghastly contrast between life and death that he at

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At Herbert's doomsday, our past as bones is not erased; nor do we now, even when reminded of our glorious eventual destiny, forget our present potential to become dust at any moment. But the joyful change of attitude brought about by "our Saviours death" (as the ambience of Herbert's poem alters from a materialistic view of the skeleton to a Christian one) has to be made real, stylistically, in the bald light of what we already know from looking directly at the grave's "hideous" bones. Death has undergone the sort of magical transformation into a human figure that is familiar in folktale and legend. The congratulatory air of Herbert's fourth and fifth stanzas has the poet's usual touch of comedy-in-seriousness: Death is at present a celebrity much in request, newly adorned by the poet with alliterative phrases drawn from the lexicon of legend—"fair and full of grace," "gay and glad." The little joke of Death's social rehabilitation can then be laid aside for the earnest future-tense doomsday vision, as newly arrayed souls rejoice, clad no longer in a mortal garment, as in the past, but in an eternal "beautie," which by alliterating with "bloud" (of Jesus) and "bones" (of the dead) connects forever the aesthetic, the redemptive, and the mortal. It would be a different matter entirely had Herbert forsaken the bones for something else: ["When souls shall wear their new array, / And in their glory be by beautie clad."] No: Herbert is not so much describing doomsday as speaking to the very concept of Death; not "their" bones but "thy" bones. Even the bony skeletal form takes on imputed radiance when Death is seen as our necessary conveyor to an aesthetically superior body.

As he draws his gentle closing moral, Herbert drops the address to Death in order to speak to and for us. We need not fear the sudden death that comes like a thief in the night; it would only hasten the day when we receive our transfigured body. The body, which is the only thing Death can touch, is only half

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of us; the other half, the soul, is immortal. The grave is only another bed, where our body will sleep until doomsday. In the certain faith of redemption, Herbert says, we can go to sleep or to death with equal trust. But Herbert, while affirming this faith, does not deny the chilling character of the posthumous interim of decay: if we sleep on a down pillow in our bed, we must sleep on a pillow of dust in the grave. By ending his poem on the word "dust," Herbert is faithful to his first, naturalistic, look at Death; but by rhyming "dust" with "trust," as he at last looks through Death, Herbert recapitulates his entire argument for a new view of Death. By alliterating "down" and "dust," Herbert suggests how easily "we can go die as sleep." The grave is "honest" and "faithfull" because it is charged with rendering back, on the Last Day, every grain of dust that it contains: it is a good and faithful servant.

The satisfying conclusiveness of the ending of "Death" depends on Herbert's efforts to transcribe fairly both the human last look at, and the Christian last look through, Death, as he depicts, in his binocular style, the hideous beside the glorious, conjoining his original pity for ugly Death with the subsequent admiring of him once he is beautified by Christ's sacrifice. Herbert's fastidiousness and aesthetic intensity recoiled from the sight of the charnel house of Death; his Christian convictions granted him (to use Wordsworth's words) "the faith that looks through death"; but only his personal kindness invented the little fable that lets Death be new clad in a garment suitable for the celestial wedding feast. "Our Saviour" has saved hideous Death, as well as sinful mankind. Even a non-Christian can relish Herbert's tender effort to rehabilitate Death and can understand why, for an aesthete, Doomsday must regenerate everything, even Death itself, in an achieved beauty.

As we recall the older poems' efforts to be just to the interface of death and life, to create a genuinely binocular last look,

CHAPTER ONE

we have seen that Waller's poem "Of the Last Verses in the Book," although it draws nearer to illumination as it progresses, succeeds in retaining the "old" battered and decayed body even on the very *threshold* of the new world. And while both of Donne's two "Hymns" make an aggrieved effort to refuse the fearful nature of dying by assimilating it to living, that self-deceiving effort collapses, not only in the poet's self-sermon admitting the distinct difference between being painfully thrown down and being gloriously raised, but also in the abolition of shifting human tenses in favor of Donne's acknowledgment of the Son's tenseless eternity. Each of these stylistic choices attempts in the end to be accurate and even-handed in its last look: so much for life, so much for death. But in these Christian poems of faith, the balance is necessarily tipped, as we see, against death.

On the other hand, in "The Hermitage at the Center" and "Christmas Tree" we have glimpsed what may happen when the concept of an afterlife is no longer available to poets taking the last look. As we consider poems from the last books of Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, and Merrill, we will see them striving to do justice to difficult truths through stylistic means. Weighing fairly what it means to be alive but mortal, they hope to find a manner that can take in, in a single steady gaze, life and death. Stevens's looks at the worst; Plath's struggle between melodrama and restraint; Lowell's account of death as a set of successive subtractions from an always vital existence; Bishop's oscillations between being caught in the body and being freed into expression; and Merrill's resort to a renewed naïveté before the indescribable future will all appear as heartfelt stylistic responses to a creative predicament faced by poets unable to assume an afterlife.