

## Sharon Cameron: On 712 ("Because I could not stop for Death")

Yvor Winters has spoken of the poem's subject as "the daily realization of the imminence of death?it is a poem of departure from life, an intensely conscious leave-taking." But in its final claim to actually experience death, Winters has found it fraudulent. There is, of course, a way out of or around the dilemma of posthumous speech and that is to suppose that the entire ride with death is, as the last stanza indicates, a "surmise," and " 'tis Centuries?," a colloquial hyperbole. But we ought not insist that the poem's interpretation pivot on the importance of this word. For we ignore its own struggle with extraordinary claims if we insist too quickly on its adherence to traditional limits.

In one respect, the speaker's assertions that she "could not stop for Death?" must be taken as the romantic protest of a self not yet disabused of the fantasy that her whims, however capricious, will withstand the larger temporal demands of the external world. Thus the first line, like any idiosyncratic representation of the world, must come to grips with the tyranny of more general meanings, not the least of which can be read in the inviolable stand of the universe, every bit as willful as the isolate self. But initially the world seems to cater to the self's needs; since the speaker does not have time (one implication of "could not stop") for death, she is deferred to by the world ("He kindly stopped for me?"). In another respect, we must see the first line not only as willful (had not time for) but also as the admission of a disabling fact (could not). The second line responds to the doubleness of conception. What, in other words, in one context is deference, in another is coercion, and since the poem balances tonally between these extremes it is important to note the dexterity with which they are compacted in the first two lines.

There is, of course, further sense in which death stops for the speaker, and that is in the fusion I alluded to earlier between interior and exterior senses of time, so that the consequence of the meeting in the carriage is the death of otherness. The poem presumes to rid death of its otherness, to familiarize it, literally to adopt its perspective and in so doing to effect a synthesis between self and other, internal time and the faster, more relentless beat of the world. Using more traditional terms to describe the union, Allen Tate speaks of the poem's "subtly interfused erotic motive, which the idea of death has presented to most romantic poets, love being a symbol interchangeable with death." It is true that the poem is charged with eroticism whose end or aim is union, perhaps as we conventionally know it, a synthesis of self and other for the explicit purpose of the transformation of other or, if that proves impossible, for the loss of self. Death's heralding phenomenon, the loss of self, would be almost welcomed if self at this point could be magically fused with other. . . .

. . . death is essence of the universe as well as its end, and the self is wooed and won by this otherness that appears to define the totality of experience.

Indeed the trinity of death, self, immortality, however ironic a parody of the holy paradigm, at least promises a conventional fulfillment of the idea that the body's end coincides with the soul's everlasting life. But, as in "Our journey had advanced," death so frequently

conceptualized as identical with eternity here suffers a radical displacement from it. While both poems suggest a discrepancy between eternity and death, the former poem hedges on the question of where the speaker stands with respect to that discrepancy, at its conclusion seeming to locate her safely in front of or "before" death. "Because I could not stop for Death," on the other hand, pushes revision one step further, daring to leave the speaker stranded in the moment of death.

Along these revisionary lines, the ride to death that we might have supposed to take place through territory unknown, we discover in stanza three to reveal commonplace sights but now fused with spectacle. The path out of the world is also apparently the one through it and in the compression of the three images ("the School, where Children strove," "the Fields of Gazing Grain?," "the Setting Sun?") we are introduced to a new kind of visual shorthand. Perhaps what is extraordinary here is the elasticity of reference, how imposingly on the figural scale the images can weigh while, at the same time, never abandoning any of their quite literal specificity. Hence the sight of the children is a circumscribed one by virtue of the specificity of their placement "At Recess?in the Ring?" and, at the same time, the picture takes on the shadings of allegory. This referential flexibility or fusion of literal and figural meanings is potential in the suggestive connotations of the verb "strove," which is a metaphor in the context of the playground (that is, in its literal context) and a mere descriptive verb in the context of the implied larger world (that is, in its figural context). The "Fields of Gazing Grain?" also suggest a literal picture, but one that leans in the direction of emblem; thus the epithet "Gazing" has perhaps been anthropomorphized from the one-directional leaning of grain in the wind, the object of its gazing the speaker herself. The "Children" mark the presence of the world along one stage of the speaker's journey, the "Gazing Grain?" marks the passing of the world (its harkening after the speaker as she rides away from it), and the "Setting Sun?" marks its past. For at least as the third stanza conceives of it, the journey toward eternity is a series of successive and, in the case of the grain, displaced visions giving way finally to blankness.

But just as after the first two stanzas, we are again rescued in the fourth from any settled conception of this journey. As we were initially not to think of the journey taking place out of the world (and hence with the children we are brought back to it), the end of the third stanza having again moved us to the world's edge, we are redeemed from falling over it by the speaker's correction: "Or rather?He passed Us?." It is the defining movement of the poem to deliver us just over the boundary line between life and death and then to recall us. Thus while the poem gives the illusion of a one-directional movement, albeit a halting one, we discover upon closer scrutiny that the movements are multiple and, as in "I heard a Fly buzz when I died," constitutive of flux, back and forth over the boundary from life to death. Despite the correction, "Or rather?He passed Us?," the next lines register a response that would be entirely appropriate to the speaker's passing of the sun. "The Dews drew" round the speaker, her earthly clothes not only inadequate, but actually falling away in deference to the sensation of "chill?" that displaces them as she passes the boundary of the earth. Thus, on the one hand, "chill?" is a mere physiological response to the setting of the sun at night, on the other, it is a metaphor for the earlier assertion that the earth and earthly goods are being exchanged for something else. Implications in the poem, like the more explicit assertions, are contradictory and reflexive, circling back to underline the very premises they seem a moment ago to have denied. Given such ambiguity, we are constantly in a quandary about how to place the journey that, at anyone point, undermines the very certainty of conception it has previously established.

[Cameron here inserts an analysis of George Herbert's "Redemption"]

While Dickinson's representation of the ride with death is less histrionic, it is as insistent in our coming to terms with the personalization of the even and of its perpetual reenactment in the present. For the grave that is "paused before" in the fifth stanza, with the tombstone lying flat against the ground ("scarcely visible?"), is seen from the outside and then (by the transformation of spatial considerations into temporal ones) is passed by or through: "Since then?'tis Centuries?." The poem's concluding stanza both fulfills the traditional Christian notion that while the endurance of death is essential for the reaching of eternity, the two are not identical, and by splitting death and eternity with the space of "Centuries?," challenges that traditional notion. The poem that has thus far played havoc with our efforts to fix its journey in any conventional time or space, on this side of death or the other, concludes with an announcement about the origins of its speech, now explicitly equivocal: "'tis Centuries?and yet / Feels shorter than the Day." What in "There's a certain Slant of light" had been a clear relationship between figure and its fulfillment (a sense of perceptive enlightenment accruing from the movement of one to the other) is in this poem manifestly baffling. For one might observe that for all the apparent movement here, there are no real progressions in the poem at all. If the correction "We passed the Setting Sun? / Or rather?He passed Us?" may be construed as a confirmation of the slowness of the drive alluded to earlier in the poem, the last stanza seems to insist that the carriage is standing still, moving if at all, as we say, in place. For the predominant sense of this journey is not simply its endlessness; it is also the curious back and forth sweep of its images conveying, as they do, the perpetual return to what has been perpetually taken leave of.

Angus Fletcher, speaking in terms applicable to "Because I could not stop for Death," documents the characteristics of allegorical journeys as surrealistic in imagery (as for example, the "Gazing Grain?"), paratactic in rhythm or structure (as indeed we can hear in the acknowledged form of movement: "We passed . . . We passed . . . We passed . . . Or rather?He passed Us . . . We Paused . . ."), and almost always incomplete: "It is logically quite natural for the extension to be infinite, since by definition there is no such thing as the whole of any analogy; all analogies are incomplete, and incompletionable, and allegory simply records this analogical relation in a dramatic or narrative form."

But while the poem has some of the characteristics of allegory, it nonetheless seems to defy such easy classification. Thus the utterance is not quite allegory because it is not strongly iconographic (its figures do not have a one-to-one correspondence with a representational base), and at the same time, these figures are sufficiently rigid to preclude the freeing up of associations that is characteristic of the symbol. We recall Coleridge's distinction between a symbolic and an allegorical structure. A symbol presupposes a unity with its object. It denies the separateness between subject and object by creating a synecdochic relationship between itself and the totality of what it represents; like the relationship between figure and thing figured discussed in the first part of this chapter, it is always part of that totality. Allegory, on the other hand, is a sign that refers to a specific meaning from which it continually remains detached. Through its abstract embodiment, the allegorical form makes the distance between itself and its original meaning clearly manifest. It accentuates the absolute cleavage between subject and object. Since the speaker in "Because I could not stop for Death" balances between the boast of knowledge and the confession of ignorance, between a oneness with death and an inescapable difference from it, we may regard the poem as a partial allegory.

The inability to know eternity, the failure to be at one with it, is, we might say, what the allegory of "Because I could not stop for Death" makes manifest. The ride with death, though it espouses to reveal a future that is past, in fact casts both past and future in the indeterminate present of the last stanza. Unable to arrive at a fixed conception, it must rest on the bravado (and it implicitly knows this) of its initial claim. Thus death is not really civilized; the boundary between otherness and self, life and death, is crossed, but only in presumption, and we might regard this fact as the real confession of disappointment in the poem's last stanza.

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