CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lament, Praise, Consolation:
Pain/Difficulty, Ease

I saw him dead," Marvell wrote in his elegy for Oliver Cromwell, "A Poem upon the Death of O. C." The poem is a large ceremony and does many things, but only when the dead body is viewed does Marvell insist on his own direct presence:

I saw him dead, a leaden slumber lyes,
And mortal sleep over those wakefull eyes:
Those gentle rays under the lids were fled,
Which through his looks that piercing sweetnesse shed;
That port which so majestique was and strong,
Loose and depriv’d of vigour, stretch’d along:
All wither’d, all discolour’d, pale and wan,
How much another thing, no more that man?
Oh! humane glory, vaine, oh! death, oh! wings,
Oh! worthlesse world! oh transitory things!
Yet dwelt that greatnesse in his shape decay’d,
That still though dead, greater than death he lay’d;
And in his alter’d face you something faigne
That threatens death, he yet will live again.

(247–60)\(^1\)

The closed eyes are most wondered at as the poet’s attention first centers on the remembered effects that those eyes made. The gentler side of a strong public figure is a normal subject for personal praise in a funeral eulogy. But the wise and accomplished orator, like the poet, will draw upon his own resources of feeling, and Marvell’s art does present him as speaking for himself and to himself with minimal regard for others and the public occasion. The temporal relations of past and present are clear and fixed in a literal way, yet the life that the eyes gave the countenance dominates the description vividly. For the poet is imagining Cromwell alive, and the fact of deadness only frames the picture.

What follows, the memory of the carriage of the body, is not, however, shielded from the contrast of present appearance as Cromwell’s eyes were. The fact of deadness now shocks and moves from the
frame to the center of attention. Though the particularities of description are registered as they are, they are intensified by the pained response of feeling, which receives, as it were, the report of the senses with, so it seems, minimal participation in the act of recording. (The epithets themselves are almost clinical in their objectivity, though not as they ring in the verse, and not the “all” repeated.) Finally, a powerful climax in the plainest of language, the delayed recognition of the deadness as otherness: “How much another thing, no more that man?” At this point the disciplined order shatters, and the viewer responds with a cry, the expression of an ancient impulse turning against the worth of life, rediscovering life as a hated illusion convincingly revealed by death. Fragmentary phrases, key words, and the punctuating “oh’s” evoke in a single, framed moment the whole literature of lament for the vanity of human purpose. The outburst says all, in a *contemptus mundi* of record brevity, but it is an outburst, not so much a climax of emotion as a necessary purge of unexpressed feelings. For when the dead body is looked at again, the facts of alteration and otherness no longer shock but now permit the access to second thoughts, a renewal of long-practiced human ways of perceiving images of necessity. Something composed of memory and imagination can reconstitute the indwelling presence of greatness. Then the poet’s eye returns where it began, to the face. He speaks to himself in a customary otherness of the poet as maker (feigning and forming, handling and shaping by touch, *fingere*), and the dimension of time is now future:

> And in his alter’d face you something faigne  
> That threatens death, he yet will live again.

Belief in life dies hard and not all at once. Marvell finds the way to admit an awkward stubbornness in the honest feelings of a rational viewer, the perseverance in himself of human stirrings that make and keep the legends and myths. And so the otherness in death becomes altered, becomes a not-quite-admitted personified abstraction, less material than aura or wraith, but a figurative otherness not unlike the indwelling presence of “greatnesse” in the dead body—a figurative otherness that seems to take the place of the factual otherness of the dead body. If “no more that man,” then still “another thing”; Marvell apprehends him still living in another way, which does not oppose death as fact and alteration but death as annihilation. When he draws back from this moment of strange testifying in the personal shadows, Marvell’s imagination resumes its work under the steady and familiar illumination of practical reason. Cromwell’s future life, that of “praise,” will renew itself when truth emerges from the obscurities of present partisanship.
and envy. As for the superior form of living again, that of the soul in bliss, which derives from no expression left on the face, the topic receives a separate celebration, entirely expected but by no means routine in its individualizing appropriateness.

For the poet, as if he were a naive semi-literalist, faithfully follows the main road and applies the traditional principle of imagining immortality as crowning mortality by banishing all the impediments of former ill and by heightening to the fullest all previous acquaintance with good. The otherness the poet saw in the dead man, and felt with dismay, achieves its final identity as Marvell himself presides over an imagined dialogue, in heaven and without words, between Cromwell's "great" soul and a "thee" who in his regard for space and purity seems to have an unbroken connection with Cromwell's former self:

There thy great soule at once a world does see,  
Spacious enough, and pure enough for thee.  
How soon thou Moses hast, and Joshua found,  
And David, for the sword and harpe renown'd.

(291–94)

After their separate, but evolving, heroic destinies, Moses, Joshua, and David consort timelessly in divine retirement, and Cromwell joins that select company. The materials for praising the great man as he lived are too intractably assertive to accommodate themselves to the mythmaking, and they obtrude. An insuperable obstacle was that Cromwell had to be represented as himself in a story too individual to fit the old supports and their fictional authority. He could not, like Spenser's shepherdess "Dido," act for someone else in a perfected story and thus represent the general conditions of human grief and consolation.

But my chief purpose in dwelling upon the poem, and its episode of viewing the dead body, concerns that intense confrontation of the otherness in death, the poet's using the immediacies of his personal experience, and his imaginative efforts to transfer and reconcile the brute fact of otherness.

In writing about the execution of Charles in his great "An Horatian Ode," Marvell does not testify directly. He is writing history in which the episode of a crucial death occurs, one that is presented vividly as "that memorable Scene," "that memorable Hour." He takes for himself the inconspicuous place of an eyewitness, which he fills with the power and advantage of a poet:

That thence the Royal Actor born  
The Tragick Scaffold might adorn:
ON THE DEATH OF SOMEONE ELSE

While round the armed Bands
Did clap their bloody hands.
He nothing common did or mean
Upon that memorable Scene:
But with his keener Eye
The Axes edge did try:
Nor call’d the Gods with vulgar spight
To vindicate his helpless Right,
But bow’d his comely Head,
Down as upon a Bed.
This was that memorable Hour
Which first assur’d the forced Pow’r.
So when they did design
The Capitols first line,
A bleeding Head where they begun,
Did fright the Architects to run;
And yet in that the State
Foresaw it’s happy Fate.

(53–72)

We view the living body and the present circumstances framed by pregnant suggestions placed there by the poet. The past is implied in that rich introductory reference to the life of acting and the acting of life. Marvell does not need to mention that the scaffold has been raised outside Whitehall. The future is implied in the analogy of an ancient “bleeding Head,” and the axe does not fall in the scene, for the death happens off stage, as it were, though the governing proprieties do not seem to be those of classical tragedy. The otherness of Charles is that of a man not dead but getting ready to be dead. He is another man than the king has been, and in more than one way opening to ironic reflections. But the otherness is not as extreme as that recognized in a friend’s dead body, to be dealt with as best one may but with no access to the intellectual help of irony. The otherness is a more familiar kind, that of a tragic actor true to a role that has the established purpose of creating terror among its emotions and opening the mind to images of death—mysterious enough in the power to draw and hold an audience while allowing individual lines of partial withdrawal. But the death to take place on that stage is in earnest, and the acting is, if not unrehearsed, still not to be performed again. Facing death Charles acts admirably, suppressing all that is “common” to human nature and rising to meet, as by choice, the full height of the role that is forced upon him—in accordance with his image of himself in his last royal appearance, while living
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up to the ideals of the gentleman’s manly code and exemplifying, more briefly, the spirit of religious teaching on the acceptance of death.

As for customary otherness of the poet as maker caught up in his concentrated imagining of the scene, we all admire that and the memorable dignity created by the sympathetic detachment of Marvell’s art. But the poet does make his personal presence felt, though not by using and developing the immediacies of his own experience as in confronting the otherness of the dead Cromwell.

The introductory reference to “the Royal Actor born” is no eyewitness report but a complex imaginative summary; if it does not extrude like reverberations of an authorial voice, it nevertheless derives from an individual intelligence imposing itself on the materials of history and giving them a distinctive verbal shape. The “armed Bands” applauding are presented as reported fact—but with shocking differences. Their hands are “bloody”—a metaphor so close to fact that the narrow margin is filled with calculated violence. For the solitary actor is surrounded by expectant hatred applauding in advance as if to disrupt the noble illusion of a stage performance. And the author quietly separates himself from that part of the audience, which takes on a “common,” “mean,” brutal, hateful otherness against which the self-contained otherness of the tragic actor shines like an elevated emblem of human virtue. (That audience applauding blood is an organized mob, and the savagery stimulated by a spectacle ambiguously resembling art may bear comparison with Sidney’s mob of mourners in the intervals between their listening to poetic laments.) The description of Charles’s actions which follows is a highly selective mingling of metaphor and almost literal report. The first and third alternating statements, presented as if they were mere report, say what he did not do. The second statement, describing the eye “keener” than the axe, is an action produced by the poet’s imagining eye, the same eye that would detect the signs of “greatness” in Cromwell’s dead body, and “something” in the face that “threatens death,” etc. Similarly, the fourth statement describes a voluntary action of humility, a graceful bowing of “his comely Head,” accepting death as sleep.

Then the author “appears” most forwardly, though in the coolest voice imaginable, summarizing the events like an official release or like the consensual report of a conference of historians belonging to the same school. This is followed by the explanatory “So” of a neutralsounding analogy drawn from ancient Roman history. But the personal intelligence directing this operation has assumed an intellectual separateness colder in its digestion of violence and more the master of brutality than the otherness of the simple-minded “armed Bands.” The
“So” of historical analogy wanders into the charm of a well-told story, an example as parable, suitable for any handbook of revolution, illustrating the principle that political power is founded on blood—not gentility of blood but the power to shed it, and not neglecting the political force collected by the commitment of having shed it, the Rubicon of the “forced Pow’r.” The hired “Architects” are frightened, as we might be in the bodies of our common humanity, but a more mysterious body, “the State”—reassured by whatever dark consultations it listens to—“Foresaw it’s happy Fate.”

This last episode distantly recalls the (later) moment, in writing on Cromwell, when Marvell stubbornly struggles in that darkness where the deepest human desires cannot accept the thought of annihilation as a fact:

And in his alter’d face you something faigne
That threatens death, he yet will live again.

There he is personal, immediate, and openly tentative, professional artist and stricken amateur man doing the best he can under heavy obligations, trying to reconcile the brute fact of otherness in death. Here he is utterly professional, towering in his detachment, a stranger to himself and not a little frightening. Nor should we retreat from such a sense of the man as artist if we intuit some violence against himself in that voluntary alliance he makes with the “armed Bands,” transferring as in a succession of symbolic objects their “bloody hands” to the portentous, not bloody but “bleeding Head,” which he has introduced from the neutral pages of ancient history, and introduced to take the place of the head of Charles, which the recent history omits in reporting the scene. That head was, at that time, really bleeding. The analogy transfers the dignified person of Charles to the absolute otherness of an object from history which is transformed into an emblem, a guiding light out of the darkness—not a kindly or cheerful light, and illuminating itself like some magic mirror vision of necessity, a strange mirror that seems to be held by no hands.

These are poems and exercise their due privileges. Poets are also known to be readers of their own words, and a day-by-day life may continue for many years along with the existence of the manuscript of a stunning unpublished poem. If, incredible, Marvell never reread the poem, he would have remembered it, and if he suppressed in the writing, or was not aware at the time, he would have learned that Charles’s noble resignation—a truly “good” death in the eyes of many laymen and churchmen—produced some legal ambiguities in the matter of
succession. Was it a legal as well as a religious resignation? Marvell could not have forgotten that Charles’s bleeding head refused to be converted altogether or for long into an omen of “happy Fate.” The head and the body would continue their own existence in the history of men’s thoughts and feelings—Marvell’s too.²

But to withdraw a little from the counterinvasion of art by life: Marvell tried hard and gave shape to a rare kind of personal truth communicable to others in the justly less famous poem on the death of Cromwell. He falters and loses, but the best of what he manages to say deserves to be remembered, though the key passage is not in any usual sense beautiful; not, like the “memorable Scene,” a moment that can fill and haunt the imagination for centuries, as affecting in the quiet of the solitary reader as in the recitation by Winston Churchill (the heroic lines only) in a rousing wartime speech—incomparable in its depth and intricacy of glow, the sympathetic, enchanting resonances, and the disturbing sharpness and finish. One does not need to add to the chorus of praise for his verses on the death of Charles, but it may be worth adding that the power of the piece would have been unattainable if Marvell had not worked by inspired and calculated omissions. And a final remark in the same vein: in at least one respect the passage resembles the complex, bravura primitivism of Sidney’s elegiac poets, who in their artistic concentration bring forth highly ordered, fluent, and limited views of experience.

“Man is a stranger to himself.” “Silence augmenteth grief, writing encreaseth rage.” Trusting the immediacies of personal experience in confronting the death of another is filled with uncharted risks. One may need the advice of another voice to resist the inner voice—preferably the authoritative voice of the other who has not died yet and may justly worry about such influence on random chance. Don’t have bad dreams, the departing Donne counsels his mistress. Do not, especially, have this particular one:

    crying out, oh, oh,
Nurse, oh my love is slaine; I saw him goe
Ore the white Alpes, alone; I saw him, I,
Assayld, fight, taken, stabb’d, bleede, fall, and dye.³

In the same poem, arguing in another mood against her accompanying him disguised as a page, he praises her true identity and urges: “bee not strange/To thy selfe onely.” Donne himself became a learned expert and adventurer in the possibilities of being strange to oneself. Not all of the ways are deep or perilous, or incapable of supporting subdivisions and
the healthful exercise of good humor which others might enjoy as their own. Thus he turns around the passionate human cry, Why to me, why not to someone else?

How many men that stand at an execution, if they would aske, for what dies that Man, should heare their owne faults con­demned, and see themselves executed, by Attorney? We scarce heare of any man preferred, but wee thinke of our selves, that wee might very well have beeene that Man; Why might not I have beeene that Man, that is carried to his grave now? Could I fit my selfe, to stand, or sit in any Mans place, and not to lie in any mans grave? I may lacke much of the good parts of the meanest, but I lacke nothing of the mortality of the weakest; They may have acquired better abilities than I, but I was borne to as many infirmities as they. To be an incumbent by lying down in a grave, to be a Doctor by teaching Mortification, by Example, by dying, though I may have seniors, others may be elder than I, yet I have proceeded apace in a good University, and gone a great way in a little time, by the furtherance of a vehement fever; and whomsoever these Bells bring to the ground today, if hee and I had beeene compared yesterday, perchance I should have been thought likelier to come to this preferment, then, than he.4

Like gallows humor at its best, the performance is playing to the audience that will be there to savor the precarious relish. The author is speaking in his own person, but that person is responding to the special constrictions and liberties of one who is ready to leave and is practicing his farewells to life while enjoying (as author-actor) the unique privilege of saying what only one in his position can say with such convincing and unsettling authority. Even the predictability of some of the wit, uncharacteristic of Donne, exploits with a sure hand what a public audience will most want; and while the moment of drama lasts, even those individuals of refined taste and judgment will accept their feeling, as members of the strange, brief community of an audience, what their unseen neighbors feel. The author is speaking in his own person, but his mind is playing and is like the appointed persona of an evolving drama, a persona that shows no signs of understanding its real intention, that of preparing to leave this interlude and all the prominently displayed opportunities of the position and its moment. In the following Devotion Donne will welcome the answer from without (reality untainted by any suspicion of his own mental collaboration), and in responding to his own condition in another man’s he spontaneously turns from himself to
pray for the soul of his unknown dying neighbor for whom the bell
tolls. In the act he is indeed loving his neighbor as himself, and the self is
reduced to a minimal state beyond which it could not recognizably love
someone as distinctly other than the self—or so Donne might have said
with a characteristic turn of thought.

The self I am trying to describe is not consciously indifferent, as in
the example of Montaigne’s thinking of someone recently dead, like
himself, but “I don’t remember whom”; nor like the rigorous, active,
uniquely mixed detachment of Marvell writing on the death of Charles;
nor like the “holy indifference” of the “we” in the last stanza of Her­
bert’s “Death.” These are distinctions that may be recognized but do
not lend themselves to simple categorizing or defining. It may be better
to say that when Donne prays for his unknown dying neighbor his own
self is less reduced than transformed.

The sustained context of Donne’s Devotions is one in which pain
and difficulty are made convincingly real. Without the power, weight,
and endurance of the whole preceding course of introspection, the
turning outward would be different in quality; its nature is, if not
defined, at least corroborated by what it turns away from with inspired
spontaneity. The ease of the turning acts as a validation of itself; the pain
and difficulty experienced are both indirect proof of and a direct con­
nection to the ease.

I am not prepared to announce a fixed principle that will not
require some adjustments for differing circumstances, but the rela­
tionship of pain/difficulty and ease occurs often in my subject and has
already occurred, though not singled out for separate attention. I now
present some reminders and a brief review. The underlying plot of
Spenser’s “November” is the transformation of pain and difficulty to
ease (a kind of “doolful pleasaunce”); the basic plot is a sure model for
Milton’s “Lycidas.” In contrast, Montaigne and others will seem con­
spicuous in resolving difficulty and stressing ease. In their context
Sidney’s laments suggest an unbridged interval between the savage pain
and the fluent ease of expression.

As for Marvell, whose ease makes the expositor sweat: the scene of
Charles’s execution is a long moment preceded by no pain or difficulty
and dominated by a strongly willed ease, that of an extraordinary col­
laboration between the control of the artist and the control of the tragic
protagonist who is being presented. It is a moment in which mind and
spirit exercise their privilege within a space of scenic time outside of
which the impending violence waits. The following scene is utterly
different, and especially its kind of contrived ease by which an ex­
changed “bleeding Head” will be produced as the solving moral of the
historical tragedy. In the great scene that leads to the point of execution and then allows historical fact and narrative convention to complete the undescribed event, we may feel, as many readers do, a kind of undercurrent of pain, of difficulty, in the deliberately constrained suggestiveness of the language: as in the gross violence of the applauding spectators, and in the thoughtful calm at the center of the scene, the irony, the sympathy about which accredited interpreters argue well and without resolution. If we do not find open pain under the ease, we do find some shifting difficulty and may believe that it is not all of our own making.

On the other hand, the clarity of Marvell's painful struggle in the presence of Cromwell's dead body registers itself as an authentication of his experience. There he presents the materials and order of his responses in the form of a personal story, but that story, however immediate and spontaneous, is also representative, the vehicle of expected and time-honored elements of elegy: lament, praise, and consolation. The consolation is freely wrought, woven into and out of the praise, and yet the consolation separates itself with troubled difficulty, and therefore not altogether, from the lingering resonances of lament. The consolation resembles in part the "doolful pleasance" of Spenser's "November," the mixed pleasures of art and assurance taming the wild grief of loss. Yet, since Cromwell in his own person could not be assimilated to a general myth, Marvell's efforts are not capable of disappearing into the story. Throughout the poem, as in the discussed episode of Cromwell's entrance into immortality, Marvell's efforts are strenuous and individual in adapting and modernizing, sometimes well, sometimes too well, many of the commonplace and tropes of consolation. The expected credentials of personal pain as the mourner tells his own story are, however, too individual to be contained in the embrace of old forms. In the cumulative sense of ordering, which has the purpose of tempering grief with consolation, his personal shock at the brute otherness of the dead was too strong and unforgettable to be turned into general consolation and hope. Although where the course and resolution of pain are familiar and expected what is old conveys a kind of ease, in Marvell it is an unsettled ease in which a truth of personal feeling once expressed will not be denied and cannot be changed into something else—at least this master of feeling and expression does not do so. If we do not encounter other examples quite like this one, we may believe that other poets did not see what Marvell saw, or did not let themselves both see and say the irredeemable thing.