



Last Looks, Last Books: Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merrill (The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts)

Helen Vendler

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In *Last Looks, Last Books*, the eminent critic Helen Vendler examines the ways in which five great modern American poets, writing their final books, try to find a style that does justice to life and death alike. With traditional religious consolations no longer available to them, these poets must invent new ways to express the crisis of death, as well as the paradoxical coexistence of a declining body and an undiminished consciousness. In *The Rock*, Wallace Stevens writes simultaneous narratives of winter and spring; in *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath sustains melodrama in cool formality; and in *Day by Day*, Robert Lowell subtracts from plenitude. In *Geography III*, Elizabeth Bishop is both caught and freed, while James Merrill, in *A Scattering of Salts*, creates a series of self-portraits as he dies, representing himself by such things as a Christmas tree, human tissue on a laboratory slide, and the evening/morning star. The solution for one poet will not serve for another; each must invent a bridge from an old style to a new one. Casting a last look at life as they contemplate death, these modern writers enrich the resources of lyric poetry.

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