

Class 4 : Recognition

A. Looking Death in the Eye

1. Section title A (Picasso: *Self-Portrait Facing Death*)
2. — the same, complete

One *LateStyle* characteristic I keep mentioning is an explicit treatment of death. Today, I am offering a gallery of artists who have done just that: composers in the second hour, and poets in the first. Plus a few painters, starting with this remarkable *Self-Portrait* by **Pablo Picasso** (1881–1973), drawn in crayon in 1972, when he was 90, less than a year before his death. So it is late-style literally, but I don't know that you can call it *LateStyle*, because Picasso had so many styles, and was switching between them up to the very end.

3. Class menu

While all the works I shall show today come from late in their creators' careers, they are not all *LateStyle* in the sense of free technique or unusual forms; all I require for the purposes of today's class is that the work should address the end of life, either explicitly or by implication. But I have broken it down by the different circumstances in which artists have approached death. Perhaps, like **Picasso** and **Michelangelo**, because they were very old. Perhaps, like **Keats** and **Schubert**, because they were ill and knew they were dying. Perhaps, like **Wilfred Owen** and **August Macke**, because they were going into war and knew they might not survive. Perhaps, like **Mark Rothko** and **Sylvia Plath**, because they were suicidal. Perhaps, like **Emily Dickinson** and probably **Gustav Mahler**, because they were death-obsessed from an earlier age.

4. Charley Toorop: *Last Self-Portrait* (1955)
5. — the same, with *Self-Portrait with Children* (1929)

Nobody would call this last *Self-Portrait* by the Dutch artist **Charley Toorop** (1891–1955) experimental in style or loose in handling. Yet she has the same staring eyes as Picasso, and that black curtain pulled across the window has a powerful significance. Toorop was actually fond of depicting the passage of time; here are two earlier portraits, one showing her with her children, the other, titled *Three Generations*, showing her with her adult son and a bust of her father, the artist **Jan Toorop**.

6. Elizabeth Bishop and Stevie Smith

Not all artists who look Death in the eye do so grimly, or with such cold objectivity. I am going to give you the last poems by these two women poets: one English, **Stevie Smith** (1902–71), and the other American **Elizabeth Bishop** (1911–79). I think you will find they have a certain degree of optimism, and even humor. The reader of the Smith poem, *Black March*, is **Caroline Harker**.

7. Stevie Smith: *Black March*, read by Caroline Harker
8. Elizabeth Bishop: *Sonnet*

Elizabeth Bishop had written conventional sonnets earlier in her career; there is one from 1928 that is a popular choice for readers on YouTube; it begins:

*I am in need of music that would flow
Over my fretful, feeling finger-tips,
Over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips,
With melody, deep, clear, and liquid-slow.*

But this is a different matter entirely, truly *LateStyle* in its play against conventional forms. It is still a sonnet of sorts: 14 lines, linked by a rhyme scheme. But the sestet (six-line section) comes before the octet, and the individual lines are far from being iambic pentameters! She writes about the moment before death as being poised in the balance, like a spirit-level or compass. But when the thermometer (another measuring tool image) breaks, the mercury runs free. Although she ended her life in a same-sex relationship, incidentally, she never meant the last word, “gay,” to have its modern meaning.

9. Book covers by Blotkamp, Vendler, Bloom

Here are three books that I have been using a lot for this class: *The End: Artists’ Late and Last Works* by Carel Blotkamp, *Last Looks, Last Books* by Helen Vendler, and the annotated anthology *Till I End My Song* by Harold Bloom. They are all on the bibliography. Vendler does not actually discuss the Bishop poem, but she would say that it achieves what she calls a *binocular vision*, in capturing both the uneasiness of death and the release that lies beyond it.

10. Wallace Stevens: *The Hermitage at the Center*, text
11. Wallace Stevens: *The Hermitage at the Center*, text in color

Here is a poem that Vendler does discuss, that is the perfect example of binocular vision. It is *The Hermitage at the Center* by **Wallace Stevens** (1879–1955). I don’t understand the title; in fact, I didn’t understand much of it the first time around. Bishop’s Modernism did not get in the way of her meaning, but Stevens seems to go out of his way to obscure his. However, Vendler points out that the poem is actually three poems in one. The first, perfectly clear, comes from reading only the first lines of each stanza; its images are bleak and disturbing. The second, equally clear, comes from reading the second and third lines, and these are altogether more upbeat. The third poem is what you get by reading it all as a piece: complex, binocular, but deeply meaningful. I found this version online, but I don’t know who the readers are.

12. Wallace Stevens: *The Hermitage at the Center*, reading

B. Death Comes Too Soon

13. Section title B (Joseph Severn: *John Keats*)

For the rest of this hour, I will look at poets (and a few painters) whose encounters with death, for one reason or another, came prematurely. The first of these reasons—that the artist is ill and knows he is going to die—I can tackle only briefly now; we will revisit it with **Schubert** in the second hour.

14. Joseph Severn: *Keats Listening to a Nightingale*

My one example is *To Autumn*, the last great ode of **John Keats** (1795–1821), written in 1819. I admit, there is nothing about it to suggest *LateStyle*; it is as firmly constructed as the best of his earlier poems, and it may *be* the best. Perhaps in reading it as the poet's farewell to life, I am guilty of 20/20 hindsight, which is the temptation that besets all discussion of late works. But Keats knew he was going to die. Shortly after this poem was written, he coughed up blood, and immediately knew what that meant. When his friend **Joseph Severn** (1793–1879, the painter of these two portraits) refused to procure him opium, he complained, "How long is this posthumous existence of mine to go on?" He wrote no more major work after that, but it is impossible not to see *To Autumn* as the work of a man who knew—or suspected—that he did not have long to live. And seen in this way, it is an astonishingly brave and beautiful poem. The reader is **Matthew Coulton**.

15. Keats: *To Autumn*

C. I Went Hunting Wild

16. Section title C (Otto Dix: *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*)

War is another factor that brings people prematurely face to face with death. Whether or not he will actually be killed, the prospect of death in battle forces the artist into a new reckoning, often precipitating a drastic stylistic change along with it. This especially seems to have been true of World War One, and its effect on the German Expressionists. The *Self-Portrait* here by **Otto Dix** (1891–1969) is one of at least four he painted called *Self-Portrait as a Soldier*. Its deliberately naïve style makes him into a tiny pawn in a tremendous battle, anonymous, disposable.

17. Otto Dix: *Self-Portraits as a Soldier*

Here are the other three I know about. Each shows a different face of the death machine: tricked out in the history of military glory, a dehumanizing force turning human beings into meat, and a lurid darkness that engulfs everything in its path. Dix survived to paint even more lurid depictions of the War for the next decade; he lived to the age of 78. But all the other artists I mention in this section were killed.

18. August Stramm: *Guard Duty* (1915)

The Expressionist playwright **August Stramm** (1874–1915) joined up at 40, and was killed in the second year of the War. Although he had been writing very terse poetry before this, his battlefield experiences fragmented his verse still further, into a pile of shards with no grammatical connection whatsoever, but adding up to as strong a picture in its way as anything by Dix.

19. August Macke: *Promenade* (1913) and *Hat Shop* (1914)

20. August Macke: *Farewell* (1914)

Here are some of the paintings done by the Expressionist painter **August Macke** (1887–1914) in the months before the War: charming visions of bourgeois life painted in bright colors and with light abstraction influenced by the French manner. And here is his last painting, *Abschied* (Farewell), painted just after the War had broken out, and a month before he himself was killed in it. It may not be finished, but those dark figures standing like trees in a twilight wood are something entirely new for him.

21. Franz Marc: *The Fate of the Animals* (1913, Basel)

His friend **Franz Marc** (1880–1916) was rather more abstract in style, but his earlier work is enlivened by the frequent presence of animals of one kind and another. But *his* last painting, *The Fate of the Animals*, is another matter entirely, with the few remaining animals sliced and skewered by colored daggers of unstoppable force; you could easily see it as an ecological picture today. Marc painted it in 1913, a year before the War, but he did not paint again, and he too was killed. On the rear of this canvas Marc wrote, "*Und Alles Sein ist flammend Leid*" (And all being is flaming agony). After he got to the front, he wrote to his wife about the painting, "[it] is like a premonition of this war—horrible and shattering. I can hardly conceive that I painted it." [Exhibited posthumously, it was partially destroyed in a fire, but was restored by **Paul Klee**, working from sketches; tactfully, he made no attempt to match Marc's use of color.]

I have dealt with British war painting and poetry more than once in other classes. Much of it is stiff-upper-lip and modestly heroic in the approved patriotic manner, but not all of it. I do want to mention *Strange Meeting*, written in 1918 by **Wilfred Owen** (1893–1918), who would die on the very last day of hostilities. Even though written when he was only 25, the poem has several *LateStyle* fingerprints: it is personal, it is visionary, and also displays a remarkable ability to stand outside the fray—the Vendler *binocular vision* in a quite different context. The reader is **Alex Jennings**.

22. Wilfred Owen: *Strange Meeting* (1918), read by Alex Jennings

D. Where Are We Going?

23. Section title D (Gauguin, *D'ou venons nous?*)

24. Van Gogh: *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890) / Gauguin: *Where Do We Come From?* (1898)

Another category of artists who negotiate with Death at a younger age are the suicides. I am showing these two by **Vincent van Gogh** (1853–90) and **Paul Gauguin** (1848–1903) mainly to offer some color, but both require a bit of special pleading. Although the Van Gogh has gone down in the popular imagination as his last work, it probably isn't, but as Harold Bloom might say, it *ought* to be his last. Certainly **Vincente Minelli** had no qualms about using it as such in the 1956 film *Lust for Life*, with Kirk Douglas as Vincent; here are the relevant two minutes.

25. Vincente Minelli: *Lust for Life*, the final picture

26. Gauguin: *Where Do We Come From?* (1898, Boston MFA)

Gauguin painted his huge frieze-like picture in Tahiti in 1898, but he lived for another 5 years, so what makes him a suicide? In fact, he wrote to a friend that he intended to kill himself in December 1897, but first “he wanted to paint a large canvas that would be known as the grand culmination of his thoughts.” The Wikipedia article from which I stole this sentence has an analysis of the picture, which represents the whole course of human life, morality, and a synthesis of various religions. I would refer you to that if you want to know more. Gauguin did indeed try to poison himself once the picture was finished; but the attempt failed, giving him time to tinker further with the picture after he had recovered.

27. Mark Rothko: *The de Menil Chapel, University of St. Thomas, Houston, 1971*

Had Gauguin succeeded in his suicide, his career would have ended in a monumental philosophical statement that transcended individual religions. **Mark Rothko** (1903–70) achieved a similar ambition with the construction of a non-denominational chapel at Saint Thomas University in Houston, designed specifically to hold a dozen on his huge canvases. They represent absolutely nothing, and there is very little difference between them, but to sit in the chapel for half an hour is a deeply contemplative experience. The Chapel was dedicated in 1971. Rothko was present only in spirit; he had killed himself almost exactly a year before.

28. Sylvia Plath

The most famous modern poet who took her own life is surely **Sylvia Plath** (1932–63), who succeeded in what appears to have been the last of several suicide attempts, at the age of 30. Helen Vendler has an entire chapter on her, tracing the development of her style from her early poems written at Smith College to the incandescence and rage of her final volume, *Ariel*, written in the weeks before her death. She is a great poet, but not an easy one. So I will confine myself to a pair of poems about poppies, both from the *Ariel* collection. I chose the first, “Poppies in October,” because it seems to be the last poem that we have a recording of her reading herself.

29. Sylvia Plath: *Poppies in October* (read by the author)

This short poem is in the *Imagist* tradition: a visual image captured in such a way that its associations and suggestions radiate far beyond the image itself. Only in this case there appear to be at least two images: the surprise sight of a patch of scarlet poppies out of season, and a passing ambulance containing a hemorrhaging woman—something I presume the poet only imagines. There are a host of other suggestions in the last lines too, some of which (like the carbon monoxides) have additional potency if you know anything about her death. But that’s the trouble with reading poetry as biography; once you know the actual biography, you start reading all sorts of things into the verse that are not necessarily there. [Let’s hear it again.](#)

30. Sylvia Plath: *Poppies in July*

Poppies in July is a little longer, and rather more straightforward. Alas, I cannot find a good reading of it. The red poppies are the only visual image, but she views it in two ways: their brilliant red as something stirring, dangerous, and making her think of bleeding bodies or screaming lips; and the fact that they produce opium, securing oblivion, a way out. A poem that starts so simply ends as a cry of desperation.

E. An Ecstasy of Parting

31. Section title E (Cynthia Nixon as Emily Dickinson in *A Quiet Passion*)

Helen Vendler writes of Sylvia Plath: “She was always a posthumous person but it took her years to acquire a posthumous style.” **Emily Dickinson** (1830–86), however, has a posthumous style almost from the start. She was familiar with Death because she lived a life of constant **mourning**.

32. Emily Dickinson, with the first lines of some of her poems

Even a glance through the first lines of her poems shows that a large number—perhaps a quarter of the—were concerned with Death, as these snippets would suggest. But here’s the thing: there is almost no correspondence with the date at which they were written. I always thought that the first of these, her most famous poem, “Because I could not stop for Death,” would have been very late. But no, it is number 479 out of the 1,789 listed by **R. W. Franklin** in his chronological catalogue, scarcely a quarter of the way through. But then most 19th-century families were familiar with death; the death of children, relatives, and friends stricken down by ailments which would nowadays be treatable added to normal attrition through old age. And Dickinson seems to have taken it harder than most. Most of the deaths she writes about are not her own—but she takes them as her own, and writes about them in the first person, like most of the other poets we have heard today. This personalization would normally be thought a *LateStyle* trait. But with Dickinson, there was no early or middle style; it was *all* Late Style!

I am not going to analyze any Dickinson poems individually here. Instead I will play the closing sequence of the 2015 movie by **Terence Davies**, *A Quiet Passion*, starring **Cynthia Nixon** as Dickinson. I will start

after she has died and been laid out on her bed. We hear her voice reciting three of the poems: “My life closed twice before its close,” “Because I could not stop for Death,” and “This is my letter to the world.”

33. Terence Davies: *A Quiet Passion* (2015), closing sequence.

34. Main title 2 (Cynthia Nixon in *A Quiet Passion*)

F. Four Musical Farewells

35. Section title F (Beethoven death masks)

The picture shows five death masks, all purporting to have been taken from Beethoven on his deathbed. I hope the music I shall play will be nothing like this grizzly, but it made an arresting beginning! I am going to play parts from the last works of **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827) and **Franz Schubert** (1797–1828), plus the last movement of what **Gustav Mahler** (1860–1911) feared might be his final work, but turned out not to be—and, if time, the actual last music he left on his desk when he died. But first, let’s check in with my Fingerprint Chart.

36. *LateStyle* Fingerprints: Beethoven, Schubert, and Mahler

I know I played the last movement of Beethoven’s last *String Quartet*, *Opus 135*, in the first class, but I want to do it again now, to give it more time, and I hope to explain it better. For it is a prime example of a composer using music as dialectic, to make an argument about the nature of music and, in this case, quite possibly about the prospect of Death. He calls the final movement “The Difficult Resolution.”

37. *The Difficult Resolution*: themes in the last movement of Op.135

Beethoven was quite sick by this time and did not live to complete another work. So it is difficult not to think of “The Difficult Resolution” as accepting the prospect of death. But there is evidence to suggest that it might be no more than a worry about where the next check was coming from! Even if it is, though, this posture of whistling in the face of doom is utterly characteristic of Beethoven’s humor, and very much a *LateStyle* feature too. Anyway, let’s hear the movement, with my onscreen annotations. It is played by the Cincinnati **Ariel Quartet**, made up of Israeli players. And as I said before, do watch the players’ faces; this really is a conversation.

38. Beethoven: *String Quartet Op.135*, final movement

39. Title: the Schubert String Quintet

Five days before **Franz Schubert** died in 1828, his violinist friend brought three other musicians to play for him; the work that Schubert requested was one of Beethoven’s last Quartets (though not the one we have just heard). The violinist, **Karl Holz**, who had worked as Beethoven’s secretary, apparently commented, “The King of Harmony has sent the King of Song a friendly bidding to the crossing”. Schubert’s own last work had been a chamber piece for strings, though monumental and concept and

effect. Schubert added no written clues, and we could be guilty once more of the deathbed hindsight problem, but it is hard not to see this also as a composer's dialogue with Death. He certainly knew he was dying—most probably of poisoning from the mercury prescribed as a cure for syphilis.

40. Types of Contrast title

He finished the *String Quintet in C major* only a few weeks before he died. It is an unusual work, in that the fifth instrument added to the traditional string quartet is not another viola, as Mozart did, but a second cello. This gives it a rich, serious sound, even foreboding at times, although one the cellos is also free to sing a melody while the other provides the bass. What makes me think of the piece as a dialogue with death is that each movement is based on contrast between two strikingly different moods. I will play longer excerpts in a minute, but first I have put together a sampler of what to expect.

41. Contrasting moods in the Schubert String Quintet

I'll just play the exposition of the first movement. You will hear a dark brooding opening in what sounds like a slow tempo. Then some intense drama. Then that lovely passage of **romantic nostalgia** before the drama breaks out again. The use of nostalgia is very much a *LateStyle* feature; we shall have more of it in next week's class.

42. Schubert: String Quintet in C major, first movement exposition

The second movement is transcendent and ethereal. A lovely slow melody is sustained by the middle instruments, while the second cello plucks the bass, and the first violin adds little shimmers on top. I thought of shortening this, but Schumann praised Schubert for his "heavenly lengths," and I don't want to cheat him here. But it gives way to some kind of inner turmoil (much as in the Beethoven) that comes as a shocking contrast. I will have to cut after a few measures of this, well before Schubert returns to serenity once again.

43. Schubert: String Quintet in C major, first half of second movement

I have had to make several internal cuts in the third movement to give you a sense of its remarkable construction without letting you in for its full 11 minutes. It is a *Scherzo*, merrymaking you would think, but there is something forced about it, even hysterical. But then the bottom drops out of it entirely. It is as though a draught blew the ballroom door open, and you are suddenly looking out over a graveyard.

44. Schubert: String Quintet in C major, third movement (condensed)

45. Mahler and the Curse of the Ninth

Gustav Mahler was another of those artists who had been preoccupied with Death for many years. His Fourth Symphony ends with a soprano song about the angels in Heaven; his *Sixth* is punctuated by blows from an immense Hammer of Fate; and the massive *Eighth*, nicknamed *Symphony of a Thousand* for the forces it demands, is a choral symphony that out-Beethovens Beethoven, ending with a vision of Heaven taken from Goethe's *Faust, Part II*. He was showing *LateStyle* fingerprints from the middle of his career at least. What would he do with his *Ninth Symphony*? He was superstitious and scared to write it.

Beethoven and Schubert both died after their Ninths, and he did not want to follow their example. He had a bad heart and knew his years were numbered. So he tried to fool fate by writing a work of symphonic proportions in six movements, but as a song cycle for mezzo-soprano, tenor, and orchestra.

46. Hans Bethge: *Das Lied von der Erde*, text of the last movement

He chose as his text a translation of Chinese poetry by Hans Bethge (1876–1946) called *das Lied von der Erde* (The Song of the Earth). Though on a vast scale, it is a sort of verbal version of Chinese paintings such as this one. The last of the six movement, over half an hour long, is called *Abschied* (farewell), and is a lightly disguised farewell to life. Here is the text of the last 9 minutes, which is what I shall play. The singer is **Carolyn Watkinson** and the conductor is **Kurt Sanderling**.

47. Mahler: *Das Lied von der Erde*, closing section

48. Hans Bethge: *Das Lied von der Erde*, text (repeat)

Well, Mahler didn't die. He lived to write his *Ninth Symphony*, and even began work on another. But he did not beat the Curse! He died before he could finish the *Tenth Symphony* beyond a sketch of the whole with a partial orchestration of only a couple of movements. But it was completed by the English musicologist **Deryck Cooke**, and first performed in 1960. So if there is time, I want to give you the last five minutes, conducted at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam by **Yannick Nézet-Séguin**. Listen for the lovely horn melody, working up to a great climax, and then another of those long lingering fades that were Mahler's specialty. But this is not the end; at the very last moment, the orchestra breaks the silence once more, as though shaking its fist at fate. [I'll put the link on the website if we don't have time to hear it now.]

49. Mahler: *Symphony 10* (Cooke version), closing section

50. Mahler's grave