

"...though some have called thee
mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;"
--SONNET X, John Donne (on death)

CRITIC'S REVIEW OF A LEADING ROLE

I

Death never was the villain we supposed,
nor is he sinister or strange. Our acts
could not go on without him. Plays are closed
by saturation, seasons, emptied facts
and change. It's Death, our wordly partnership,
our ancient contract still inviolate,
that makes the drama work, that gives us grip
and drive. Consider how the years deflate
our starring parts. Foreverness allots
a strung-out tedium of now and here
while grinding down our once-dynamic plots.
The wise Director lets no sonneteer
recite so long he mouths a shibboleth
instead of song. The scene is saved by Death.

II

Sometimes he loiters when we'd wish more haste;
sometimes he's crude, obscene, and far from neat.
He may come on too soon which seems a waste
of knowledge, skills, a sorrowful defeat.
Yet Death is just a word we mortals use
for what we think will end all life the same.
Time curves away, form alters to diffuse
its atoms, rebuilds, takes another name.
Then unimagined drama will unfold
in new dimensions, past the spectrum's hues.
The human story's largely still untold.
Recycling stages offer other views.
Our learning is not wasted, never lost.
It's saved beyond all bridges once we've crossed.

(cont.)

III

When all transition is complete, our sets
will alter, locks will turn with different keys.
The bad press Death attracts-- ("The spinal freeze,"
a sample of the glib contempt the hero gets
costumed in hokey hood, a scythe, our debts
all listed in a book called "Final Wheeze")
is hateful slander. Unversed writers please
to heap his role with bile, implying threats
of worse reviews in major magazines.
In truth, our outraged angst is for disease,
ignoble wounds and pain. Whatever means
by which we meet, unready or uncouth,
the star is Death. Old age or cheated youth--
accept your part. Perfection supervenes.

IV

Retiring from the earthly stage at last
We change and put on makeup so unique
No actor could have worn it in the past,
Nor bowed and raised so radiant a cheek.
Each player's voice resolves a major chord
With which to sing dimensions never heard.
Each tongue transmits the music of the Lord,
Each swelling passage amplifies His Word.
I will not mourn my exit toward the wings
Or sadden over lines left unexpressed.
Soon I will have a part in greater things,
Assume my true identity twice blessed:
 Beginnings are endings of this life's disguise;
 Endings are pauses while new curtains rise.