

figure of speech

He was born when so many wished they had never been born. Worse still, he was among the last to be born, and was cursed because he would be the last to die. Time was when there was always something to come, something ahead. The sad thing was that he now did not much mind.

Today, his reflections were fanciful. He hypothesised that he might have been a poet, the last in the line of poets. He decided that (damn it!) that's just what he would call himself. A poet.

He smiled, as he lay face down receiving fat removal treatment, or, as the facility euphemistically termed it, therapy, that he might even look something like a poet. Slim, yes, and blessed with tumbling curls. All he needed was a lyre!

He decided that he should indeed attempt the last sonnet. He might even write a sonnet a day, so that when he did go, he would not only have written his own last sonnet, but also the last sonnet, on the last day of his life, of all life. He smiled again. Mere conceit of course, but at least a delicious one for a man in his position. He realised, furrowing his smooth brow at the very thought, that he might not be much aware of that tidy outcome, because he might slip finally into unconsciousness or even madness. That would spoil everything!

In any case, he was certain that he was the last, despite the theoretical possibility, however slim, that the machines had failed to detect another. He mused aloud. Lucky, lucky not much to mind. Just as long as...

Decline was the enemy, he insisted: declining ambition, waning hope, and even (as for instance when he sat watching by means of the last

functioning camera a forest of desiccated trees rattled by toxic breezes on the surface far above him) the fading even of boredom.

Luckily, he was not a man to give way to such maudlin thoughts for long, and a brisk walk up the corridor soon set him right. He needed anyway to keep an eye on the machines that trapped water and filtered the air – recycling being so much more efficient, and less of a bother than scrubbing toxins from surface rain. The machinery was failing, but would fail long after he was gone.

He planned. Research for the sonnets would mean long hours of study, such as he had not undertaken for many years, not since his struggle to qualify. Imagining the crystalline lyrics that he would write was not so very hard, although he suspected that he was probably regurgitating poems dimly remembered, read so long ago that that they merged even with recollected experience, as if his life was material itself.

He could remember little or nothing of the natural world, and yet research revelled that nature had been almost all that poets had once bothered with. The tricky part was how to incorporate such second hand images into his own linguistic expression, of devising a poetry that did not require these points of reference. He knew about concrete and steel and glass, but nothing of nightingales, sedge and basil.

He had once cultivated prose mannerisms it was true, such as an early addiction to anadiplosis, but then so many report writers had shared that weakness. He could well recall the grinding conclusion of one training session expressed on a squeaky blackboard: “profit is the life-blood, the life-blood change”. He had copied it down, as had all. The trainer had been a hard man, gone now of course, as had all his kind. None of them had expected it all to end so suddenly, for their messages to become so

meaningless so quickly. He certainly did not, nor to survive to the bitter end, to be the last.

Poetry, he thought, ought to be better than all that. He had favourite lines, of course, and he liked to think that one definition of poetry was that it was that which had never been written up on boards with squeaky marker pens as efficient and memorable bullet point summaries. What trainer would ever have concluded that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"?

His smile waned slowly. He turned, as if interrupted.

He was suddenly aware of a thought denied, but now demanding his attention. The poetry project had yet to bear fruit, and the reason was he could not, despite a lively imagination, imagine a use for the planned sonnet sequence. He could not, of course, imagine who might read them, because there would be no-one to read them. For he was the last. Almost certainly the last. The machines had told him so.

He forced himself back to the more manageable thought. How could he write when he had no damsel, no love, no distant one, no beloved? He repeated these woes until he had to resist the tears that flowed.

Again he walked the corridor, and again checked the machinery. In this haven underground there was no sound, could be no sound. His own feet were the last feet, and his breath, just about audible above the dim hum of machinery, the last breath.

Metaphor, what of simple metaphor? The thoughts fought off with a riot of self pity only moments before returned. What extension of meaning could outlast the last user of language? Would all the metaphors ever expressed by poets simply cease to be, even if written down in books stored in millions of deserted libraries on the now deserted Earth? The thing was,

could a meaning possibly be meant if there were none to comprehend it? And what was comprehension anyway, was it after all a mere game played among fellows who understood the rules? Or was God the definitive comprehender, ensuring fair play and an eternity of meaning? Could poetry be saved that way?

Rubbish! he shouted out loud.

He started, filled with childish alarm as he caught an echo of his own voice. Rubbish! Rubbish! Rubbish....

A moment and silence returned. He raved on. "Speculation! Ill conceived nonsense nurtured by young men; I discard all that!". Silence again.

Death, as has been pointed out before, is not an event. It is something that all move towards, but never arrive. The paradox is that it arrives nevertheless.

And so this last man, who would have liked to have been the last poet, stood listening to the fading reverberations of his own voice, thought his last thoughts. They were wistful thoughts, in which he was taken by a longing for the merest lone and beautiful figure of speech, spoken by another, winding a delicious strand of meaning out of the thin air of the merest words.

He named his longing wrongly, an unusual error of learning for him. He named it pathetic fallacy, named it wrongly at the utmost end.

