

Words beyond death

Literary form and its intentions in Paul Zweig's last works

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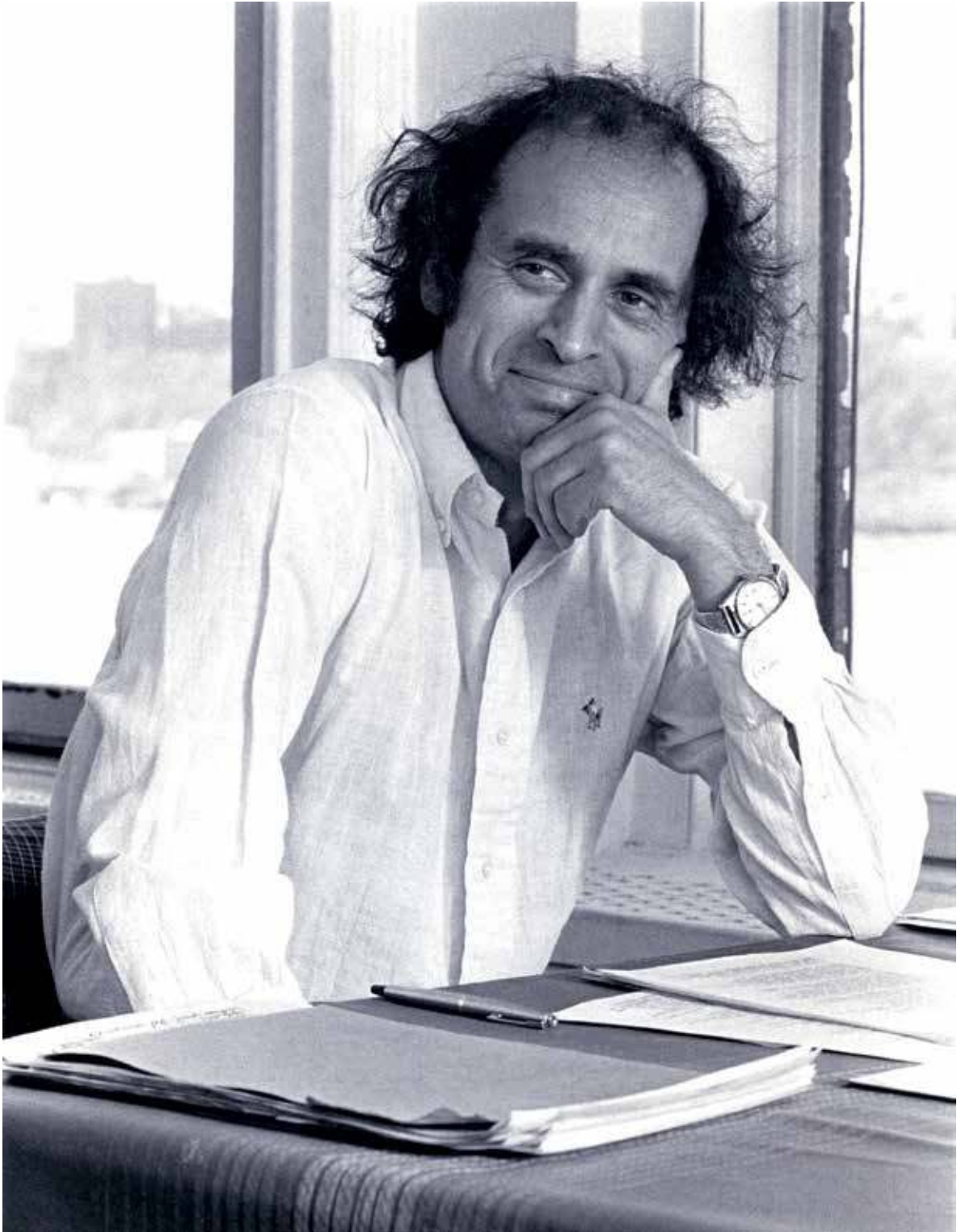
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Medical narrative lies at the intersection of some of the most fundamental concerns of literature, medicine, the body, and human relations—all that constitutes life depends on its relationship to death. Because death exists beyond human consciousness we are infinitely interested in probing its biological, philosophical, spiritual, social and literary significances. The ways of speaking about death or the process of dying are both contradictory and inconceivable. We acknowledge our mortality, yet we are baffled by it; not knowing the thing itself, only about it. We can only speak *around* death, never of it. Author, poet, and teacher Paul Zweig wrote of facing his imminent death from lymphoma and the ways this experience shaped his

understanding of life in the presence of death—not of what exists after living, but what exists at the end of living.

Zweig was preparing the manuscript of his final memoir, *Departures*, for publication at the time of his death in 1984; his book of poetry, *Eternity's Woods*, was near completion when he died and was published posthumously in 1985. He had been diagnosed with lymphoma six years earlier, a circumstance that seemed to spur a leap in productivity. Zweig lived with the foreknowledge of his approaching death, in what Philippe Aries in *Western Attitudes toward Death* calls “the tamed death.” Aries writes that those in this group, “did not die without having had time to realize they were going to die.”^{1p2-3} Zweig wrote both *Departures* and *Eternity's Woods* with this realization.

A genre analysis of Zweig's prose and his poems is revealing. *Departures* allowed him to tell stories of his life in a linear, coherent chronology. The narrative form of memoir



Paul Zweig (1980). © Robert Mahon (www.robertmahon.com).

addresses and explores the concept of time as Zweig lived with the knowledge of his impending death, while poetry allowed him to express feelings and ideas created by images, rhythm, and flexible linguistic tropes. Prose and poetry proved complementary for describing and organizing the multitude of experiences Zweig faced at the end of his life.

Zweig separates his memoir *Departures* into three distinct parts, each following a different period of his life and each leading up to a departure from that specific stage of life. Part One recounts his early twenties in Paris. Of the several recurring themes in this section Zweig is disproportionately focused on the details of his sex life. He tells us of his lovers, with frequent erotic love scenes that explore the sensual nature of his lovers' bodies. In the first paragraph he tells how he met Claire, recalling details of her living space and states, "I'm pretty sure we never made love there."^{2p35} His eloquent prose elegizes the sensual collisions between bodies:

My mattress with its deep crevice was our river. There Claire gulped with amazement; there I was a spectator to my body's nervous ability to engender this quicksand of a trance which drew me down, and yet—was I imagining it?—seemed to exclude me. Claire, freckled and wild, was like a chick, its mouth unhinged and gaping for a worm. I deposited the worm over and over again; I was inexhaustible. I wondered if I would become dehydrated from loss of body fluids.^{2p39}

Zweig's writing style balances the crass and the romantic, often using extended metaphor as a literary device to illustrate a moment. Though it may seem as if he boasts of his sexuality, he also describes his impotence. He makes his flaws transparent, part of the truth, without compromising his own self-perception, and this allows him to transition to the subject of his failing body.

And now, as we made love, I felt my mind lift away, as if under pressure of a gas. My erection seemed to freeze and then, like ebbing water, to recede. . . .

A word hung between us that I tried not to think about, but it insinuated itself into my mind and made me nauseous: *impotent*.^{2p45}

It is at this point that Zweig introduces death. His friend David has died and Zweig attributes his impotence to a personal reaction towards death.

My penis was playing dead; it saluted David . . . by shrinking to the size of a small doughy monument; it was a laughable tombstone, a bit of nameless flesh, sticking out of some grass.^{2p46}



From this point forward, death makes increasingly frequent appearances in the memoir. When David's eccentric widow Anna comes to meet Zweig in Paris he merges the concept of death with his inability to sustain life through his penis. He writes,

Ever since I had received Anna's letter, I had known what she wanted and now she was casting her strands about me, drawing me to the center of her net, and it was not even a conquest. She was taking what she needed, as if we had agreed on it long ago. But I hadn't agreed.

"You mean you don't want to fuck? Is that it?"

I stopped, thinking of David's sickness. Was I comparing my anxiety to it?^{2p65}

Anna's sexual prowess resurrects him from his sexual death.

She was a sexual encyclopedia; she had advice for everything, and she was willing to work for her ecstatic moment. Above all, she knew how to make my flagging penis work well enough for her to take her pleasure. I was like an old car, and she was the mechanic. I needed daily tune-ups. Every day little parts broke down, but Anna's fingers plunged under the hood and worked their miracle. I was kept together on spit and glue. It was uncanny, desperate, and funny, but I wasn't laughing.^{2p66}

Anna and Zweig have sex as a metaphor for conquering death, of restoring life to dead flesh. As the memoir continues, his own death looms much closer, no longer an abstraction, but a destination on a journey he has not yet finished.

While Zweig's memoir confines him to events as he perceived them, *Eternity's Woods*, his final book of poetry, takes events and images and bends, contorts, or even invents new ones. The poetic form frees Zweig to reassemble reality—or imagination. In this book, Zweig explores the tropes and motifs of love, family, aging, nature, light, death, and time—sexuality is largely absent. Each poem exists in isolation, and the author illuminates sensory detail and places the reader in a new moment of time and space. The first poem, "Aunt Lil," captures many of the tropes Zweig continues to explore in the rest of the book. The first stanza:

They brought her to the hospital
On one of those April days
That remind us we will never live enough.
That the soft smell of leaves, flowering breeze,
The silver light flashing from the windows,
Will always be too much for us.^{3p3}

The first three lines of the stanza show us a woman brought into the house of death,

the “we” draws us into the scene, bringing us to the center of the stanza: “That remind us we will never live enough.” The next two lines simply and poignantly describe the senses, the hallmarks of life: smells, feeling, sight. In the last line Zweig plays with the dichotomy of too little and too much, contrasting, “Will always be too much for us” with the third line, “That remind us we will never live enough.” To begin his book with these images sets a melancholy tone that persists from cover to cover. In the second to the last stanza of this poem he addresses death directly:

Old death,
The more I see you, the more
I know of restless eyes, vulnerable mouths,
Uncertain language of lips.^{3p5}

Zweig tells us that familiarity with death does not make the idea any more benign or manageable; rather, it makes one all the more restless, vulnerable, and uncertain. By attaching these feelings to body parts he is able to animate the body and make these sensations of discomfort a fully physical experience. In the last stanza he finds meaning in his own existence:

For I have learned what I came for:
My mad old aunt loved life.
She only hurt us when she was afraid
That it would burst in her.
She never gave in to her old age,
But expelled it from her,
And hung clean sweet living upon her walls.^{3p5}

The love of life, as his “mad old aunt loved life,” gives meaning for both of them in the face of her death.

Love is a recurring theme in *Eternity’s Woods*, as in the poem “Snow”:



Character may be a failure of love;
This morning, I want to love you,
And the birch trunks invisible on snow,
Your hand pushed warmly into my pocket;
I want to love the darkening blue at the
sky’s edge,
Our thoughts fumbling to hold on;
I want to love our breath-smoke warming

The air, then vanishing
In the frozen February day.^{3p6}

Amid the somber winter illustration, the repetition of “I want to love” suggests that the challenge in loving is time—hinted at over and over—that vanishes as quickly as the breath-smoke in the air in February day.

In another poem, “The Question,” Zweig explores his relation to death in abstractions of himself and his relation to others. From “Who am I?” the poet moves to “Who is that?”

Stone-blue winter;
The upswept brush of winter oak
Vibrates in the wind, expectant, bridelike.

Who am I?
An insect, startled, still sleeping
By the fire.

A bird clings to the telephone wire
Behind the house; an exultant questioning
Booms at its feet. When we die,
We hug the living to us as we never did;
We notice their creased skin, their quick
eyes
That slide away, seeing more than they
intended.



Who is that moving beside you,
So at ease, so colorless?
What can that dark flutter
Of his say to you, his voice thinned
To pass death’s membrane?^{3p50}

The last stanza portrays death as a membrane, conveying a sense of the ease of slipping from one side to the other. In “When we die,/We hug the living to us” there is also the presence of fear. It is unclear whether Zweig means the dying moment as a single final event, or a longer realization of one’s own dying, as in his own case. He separates those that “die” from “the living,” illustrating the hug as a clinging to life, embracing it. And in this moment of fear and rapture he notices things he never knew before. In the second stanza he seems to experience an epiphany, a momentary clarity, but he ends the poem with two more questions that leave the reader with a sense of incompleteness.

Another poem that illuminates the feeling of time cut short is “Early Waking.” Zweig’s descriptions of light and color paint a serene scene and capitalize on the qualities of natural light to bestow truth upon the observer.

Again the ashen light,
A tiny spider swinging on its pendulum thread
Against the pane.

Lately, I don’t sleep much.
It’s not anxiety, but a curious feeling
That I must pay attention, or death will gain on me.



A brightening across the valley,
Individual stalks of grass concentrate
the light.
The red glossy leaves of the wild plum
tree behind the house,
And the faded green nuggets of the
young walnuts.
A cloud leans across the sky;
A faintly gusting wind in the oaks

And juniper, as if to say:
Nothing stops or begins, this whispering is all,
This tender faded light is all.^{3p52}

Here sleep is not only the literal, physical sleep of the body, but the sense of rest, the feeling of peace, awoken prematurely by Zweig's awareness of approaching death. In the third stanza he describes a beautiful expanse of dawn on a pastoral scene, revealing the small parts of nature that hold, for him, profound truth: "Nothing stops or begins," a phrase that illustrates his feeling of stasis between time and space. His words "this whispering is all" and "This tender faded light is all" suggests both that, to him, the whispering and the light are everything in the sense of omnipresence, and also that they are everything that matters or has meaning at this fleeting, singular moment. This depiction of nature revealing personal truth is a characteristic trope of Zweig's poetry.

In the final part of his memoir *Departures*, Zweig directly addresses his diagnosis of lymphoma, his medical treatment, and his experience as life dwindles away. His principal focus is on time.

Zweig begins Part Three writing about transitions. The discovery of his cancer opens for him a new phase of existence, one that "would never become stale or overly familiar."^{2p201} He explains, "This unexplored, unchosen life was the life of the dying—the life of all life, perhaps, but starker and more intense in my case."^{2p201} Zweig's diagnosis and subsequent hospital appointments, chemotherapy sessions, and doctor consultations injects him into a world where time, as he puts it, "had been removed."^{2p201} He writes of his fear, his subdued sense of panic, as he tries to discover information about the world of death. He notes in the following passage the first few days after the realization of his lymphoma:

Time had been cut off from before my face. The world was unchanged. The streets were full of cars and pedestrians; the sun still caught in the windows of buildings. The radio reported worldwide events. Everything was the same, but time had been removed. And without time, everything was unreal, but I was horribly real, oversized, bursting as a body bursts in a vacuum.^{2p203}

Zweig's realization of his impending nonexistence renders his existence something absurd. He begins to enter an existential

space that allows him to view life as if removed from it already, to weigh the significance of every seemingly insignificant moment with delicate precision. Zweig experiences what Anatole Broyard wrote in his 1989 essay, "Doctor, Talk to Me." Written the summer before his death, Broyard notes of his experience with prostate cancer, "To most physicians, my illness is a routine incident in their rounds, while for me it's the crisis of my life."^{4p169} Zweig has the same sense of urgency as he pays attention to his doctor with hypersensitive observation. He notes:

Listening to my doctor was delicate. I took in every shrug, every rise and fall of his voice. I weighed his words on a fine scale, to detect hope or despair. Then I called up another doctor, to hear how the words sounded in his voice. I triangulated and compared, all to find something that would shut off the terror for a while.^{2p203}

Zweig struggles to ward off the fear of death. He notes, "My life had become a strategy for eluding terror,"^{2p204} and "I wanted to be cured of terror even more than of the lymphoma."^{2p205} The terror of death materializes in waiting for it. Zweig articulates the pain of waiting, "I lived in a suspended breath. I waited—what else could I do?—and yet I could not bear to wait."^{2p217} Throughout the entire third part, almost every paragraph begins with a temporal transition: "For months," "It took a few weeks," "At that time," "In the end," "It was July by now," "Every morning," "Several times that month," "As months passed," "A year before," "For three weeks," "A week later." These transitions create a temporal framework in which we see Zweig calendarize the final period of his life. The paradox of time for Zweig is that to have time would mean to have the freedom to live, but also to have time, in the foreshortened reality of his condition, to be robbed of life. Zweig attempts to subdue his fear by keeping himself busy, writing about his jogging along Riverside Drive, reading books, going for long walks, and playing with his daughter Genevieve.

I went to the playground with my three-year-old daughter and played in the sandbox, trying to imitate my daughter's innocence of time. In a peculiar way, my daughter and I were equals; neither of us had any time, and the irony was terrible, for I had lost mine and she hadn't acquired hers yet. Therefore we had each other.^{2p204}

Later he writes again of her:

unreal was my daughter as a young woman, a future I sometimes saw tentatively in her face. My daughter fluttered between the two times. Loving her drove holes in my body of time, and let in distance; distance that was denied me, distance I strove for and wished for without hoping, because hope devalued my one secure possession: the roomy present.^{2p213}

His daughter's existence confronts Zweig with the painful dichotomy of his fear of death in the presence of birth. In his poem "The River," Zweig addresses Genevieve and how she will grow up without him.

Genevieve, one day
You will remember someone: a glimpse,
A voice, telling you what I never told
—What the living never say—
Because the words ran backward in my breath.^{3p17}

And later in the poem, her youth and her innocence, her un-acquired time, as Zweig puts it, alienates him from her even though they share that common bond of elusive time. She is just beginning hers, and he ending his.



My daughter comes halfway up my thigh,
A thin, serious little girl, but already
She has her secrets. Because her face has no past,
She is still only partly human.

Compare the poem with Zweig's prose description of Genevieve of the future, "a young woman, a future I sometimes saw tentatively in her face"

The two renderings allow for different appreciations of the same subject that complement each other.

In Zweig's writing, time becomes elastic. He comes to feel that only the present exists. Because the future is death, the future becomes nothing.

But now time had been brutally torn from me. I had been thrust far into the new life, where my friend couldn't follow me, where nobody could follow me. At times . . . it seemed to me that my fright was a way of drowning my loneliness. I had become a member of a heavy tribe, those who walked minute by minute into a blankness that ate the near distance.^{3p216}

As death approaches, Zweig lives for writing, living vicariously through his words, beyond his own self.

I felt an incongruous need to finish the book I was working on. Did the world need another book? I knew that wasn't the question. I felt that writing was my best self.^{3p217}

In his writing Zweig feels able to transcend the limitations of his body and of time. He notes in this passage towards the end of his memoir:

Writing, I touched the roots of my life, as I did when Vikki and I made love, or when I spent an afternoon with my daughter. But writing was stronger, more sustaining than these. Every day, I spilled words onto my yellow pad, crossed



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out, inverted sentences, inserted new paragraphs on the back of the page. I raced my fountain pen from line to line, in erratic humps and jags. And this crabbed hieroglyphic, curling from top to bottom of the page, was my mind climbing quietly and privately to a plane of spirit that balanced above my sick body. There my limitations were acceptable; they were a language spoke by my pen, which drank at a deep source.^{2p218}

He ends his book with a somber epiphany, an action of living fully all the way to the end:

I saw that a writer's immortality exists in the moment of conception . . . A work is not a life, but writing is living, and now especially I wanted to live with all my might. I wanted to fight off the shrinking effect of fear.^{2p218}

Zweig completed the manuscript of *Departures* shortly before his death. These resounding last words are some of his final thoughts. In his writing, Zweig enacts precisely what he hopes for: he becomes permanent. Words exist beyond the flesh, they document and preserve life, they immortalize. Zweig lives each time a reader picks up his book.

Zweig's words and thoughts help us to face our own mortality. Death is inevitable, but writing gives life a way of sustaining itself beyond the limits of the body.

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