

The “Ancient Enemy”: Death in Art and Haiku

by David Grayson

When to the moment I shall say,
“Linger awhile! So fair thou art!”

Goethe, *The Tragedy of Faust* — Part I [1]

In 1964 Andy Warhol began enlisting visitors to his studio for what would become his famous “screen tests.” [2] Over a three-year period, Warhol and his crew posed nearly five hundred visitors for three-minute film portraits. Subjects ranged from friends to famous artists to street hustlers. These portraits were impromptu, unscripted, filmed in black and white, and shot in close-up. Sometimes Warhol would turn on the camera and leave the subject alone for the duration of the portrait. The subjects usually engaged in minor dramatic action such as making faces, smoking, or holding a pose.

The portraits are important from a critical perspective for many reasons—as an example of Warhol’s approach to pictorial composition, for instance. [3] For haiku writers there is another reason why they are so compelling.

I.

The most startling aspect of the portraits may be seeing the subjects — from the famous to the unknown alike — as they no longer are. Watching the films, we recognize that these people we are viewing no longer exist as they do on the screen. They have aged by over four decades; some have passed away. The qualities of youth, so evident on screen, have vanished — victims of “the murderous passage of time.” [4]

Old photographs:
how I long to know my parents
before I was born. [5]

Though best known by the general public as the doyen of Pop Art, Warhol’s preoccupation throughout his career was what the film portraits reveal — the tenuousness of time, the brevity of life, and, finally, death. [6] The critic Stephen Koch notes: “His genius was for immediacy and for an absolute refusal to tell a story. Just: this is it, this is it. Nothing more: nothing before, nothing after. Not where we’re going, not where we’ve been. Just right now. I think he was an artist dealing with immediacy, intensity, vividness, power of connection — and the threat to all of that

that comes with death.” [7]

twilight deepens
the wordless things
I know [8]

As Warhol understood, focusing on the moment — by its very definition — implies a brush with death. This is because we are always losing the moment; as soon as we notice or appreciate the present moment it is gone. Our mortality is thus revealed in the ever-changing instants of daily life.

Haiku poets, too, uncover the fleetingness of time by focusing on the moment. Francine Porad’s haiku, quoted above, refers to twilight, known as an epitome of transience and impermanence: the death of day and the birth of night.

on the patio
the afternoon drifts along
with the butterfly [9]

In this poem the afternoon “drifts along” but is still short-lived, as Patricia Machmiller reminds us. Our experience is often that all summer afternoons are too fleeting. For that matter, summer itself passes too quickly. Before you know it, many summers have come and gone.

old garden shed
the insecticide can
full of spiders [10]

As the above poems show, haiku poets cope with the fickleness of time in the seasons and the natural world. Our very attention to the natural world implies recognition of change — death and rebirth. However, it comes as no surprise that we confront change and the prospect of death most directly in our bodies and our relationships.

year of the monkey —
the hair in my ears
grows thicker [11]

As Jerry Kilbride noted, we experience change in our bodies as we grow older. We simply cannot escape the body and changes associated with aging or sickness.

autumn wind
I compare my hair
with Rapunzel’s [12]

her only nipple

begins to harden
a new year [13]

Birthdays, of course, can be a bittersweet reminder:

another birthday
I push the candles
in deeper [14]

These same issues are present in our relationships with lovers and friends, parents and children. A common lament among parents is that their children grow up too quickly; before one knows it, the children have become adults. Friendships, too, are subject to disruption.

in my wallet
my daughter
still thirteen [15]

California friends —
here today
gone today. [16]

II.

Warhol understood that the prospect of death underlies the passing—the endless passing—of moments. Death, the “ancient enemy,” is the one inevitability we all must face. [17] This prospect can make us feel, as paul m. notes, that we live on borrowed time.

summer’s end —
riding a borrowed bicycle
past the graveyard [18]

In contrast to the feeling of “borrowedness” of life, death seems final and permanent. Even if we believe in an afterlife or reincarnation, we understand that we are leaving this life and this world as we have experienced it and know it.

a gust of wind
the gravestone’s shadow
doesn’t move [19]

fallen headstone
the letters
fill with rain [20]

Like Warhol, haiku writers engage with questions surrounding mortality and the impermanence of life. Koch notes, “Immediacy, especially in the

great traditions of the Romantic movement, is always on the edge of death somewhere because we're always losing the moment. It's always vanishing."

gone from the woods
the bird I knew
by song alone [21]

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Notes:

1 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *The Tragedy of Faust—Part I*. Translated by Anna

Swanwick. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14.

Online edition: <<http://www.bartleby.com/19/1/>>. Stephen Koch quotes this passage in Ric Burns, *Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film*.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/warhol_a.html>.

2 Callie Angell. *Andy Warhol Screen Tests: The Films of Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné, Volume 1*. New York: Abrams and the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006, 12.

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3 Stephen Koch, *Stargazer: The Life, World and Films of Andy Warhol*. New York & London: Marion Boyars, 1991, 56.

4 *Ibid.*, 12.

5 James Luguri, in Jerry Ball, Garry Gay, and Tom Tico, editors. *The San Francisco Haiku Anthology*. Windsor, Calif.: Smythe-Waithe Press, 1992, 156.

6 Koch, *Stargazer*, 133.

7 Koch quoted from Burns, *Andy Warhol*.

8 Francine Porad, in Bruce Ross. *How to Haiku: A Writer's Guide to Haiku and*

Related Forms. Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 2002, 16.

9 Patricia Machmiller, in Ball, et al. *The San Francisco Haiku Anthology*, 10.

10 Ernest Berry, in Jim Kacian and the Red Moon editorial staff, editors. *A Glimpse of Red: The Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku*. Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2001, 9.

11 Jerry Kilbride, in Jim Kacian and the Red Moon editorial staff, editors. *Tug of the Current: The Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku*. Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2005, 42.

12 Fay Aoyagi, in *Mariposa* 13 (autumn--winter 2005).

13 Vincent Tripi, in Jim Kacian and the Red Moon editorial staff, editors. *Edge of Light: The Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku*. Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2004. 87.

14 Penny Harter, in Kacian et al. *Edge of Light*, 40.

15 John Kinory, in Jim Kacian and the Red Moon editorial staff, editors. *Inside the Mirror: The 2005 Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku*. Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2006, 39.

16 Alexis Rotella, in Ross. *How to Haiku*, 42.

17 Koch, *Stargazer*, 134.

18 paul m. [Paul Miller]. *Finding the Way: Haiku and Field Notes*. Foster City, Calif.: Press Here, 2002.

19 Ibid.

20 w.f. owen, in Kacian et al. *Inside the Mirror*, 56.

21 Paul O. Williams. *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*. Edited and introduced by Lee Gurga and Michael Dylan Welch. Foster City, Calif.: Press Here, 2001, 76.