Grief and the Collapse of "Distancing" in the Reader—Haiku and Ethics, a Brief Consideration

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> The [question] is what it means for our ethical obligations when we are up against another person or group, find ourselves invariably joined to those we never chose, and must respond to solicitations in languages we may not understand or even wish to understand. . . .[W]e might say that we do not merely or only receive information from the media. . . .We do not only consume, and we are not only paralyzed by the surfeit of images. *Sometimes, not always, the images that are imposed upon us operate as an ethical solicitation* . . . we are in such moments affronted by something that is beyond our will, not of our making, that comes to us from the outside, as an imposition but also as an ethical demand . . . *these are ethical obligations that do not require our consent.*
>
> ~Judith Butler[1]

A Poetics of Resistance

Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler is concerned with grieving, in particular with possibilities for grieving for the distanced other.[2] Accordingly, it is a crime against an ethical humanity when the U.S. population no longer experiences any real feeling for the deaths of Iraqis and Afghanis, in these wars[3]—and this "non-feeling" is composed or composited through coercive and selective forms of censorship, such as the government's disallowing photos to be taken of returning coffins and destroyed bodies—these images rarely appear on TV or in the press, if at all.[4]

I would submit that modern haiku, in one of its faces, is a poetics of resistance, offering a site of grieving. Through the use of broken language, imagistic and linguistic fragments, shards of a world presented via savage omission, and relativisms which linger absolutely, the haiku cuts into ordinary reality with a salient hammering: a temple bell resonant with afterimages of endinglessness. The brevity of haiku is consonant with alternation, alerity, iterations of composited "frames" of

image and imagelessness; all of which flicker into a twilight, hypothetical livingness, a bardo body[5] or liminal state of distributed democracy where each reminiscence receives equal hypothetical weight.[6] While examples abound, these two recently published works play with *the impossibility of language as image* (as in "syllable rain"; "words lie dislocated streets") evoking liminality:

hold your glass against the syllable rain

(Cherie Hunter Day, 1 Mar 2015)

storm ends words lie dislocated streets of air

(George Swede, 29 Mar 2015)[7]

Feel what is suddenly close to you, what is distant, what images arise as intimate, as tragic? As a result of the above-mentioned irruptions of perception and consciousness ("shards," "savage omission[s]," etc.[8]) one possibility for haiku is that vulnerability as conjured by the imagination becomes embodied.

The problem of the distanced other is not the "other" or distance, it is the distanced itself, as a psychological breakdown between the self, an object, and the way it is referenced.[9] Haiku retain and embellish distance, yet cut through defensive *distancing:* for example, the objective stance and suppression of the poetic "I" enhances distance, while the value placed on transparency of thought cuts through objectivity.[10] You might then say that haiku are performatively meant to confront and thus revive an intimacy of caring, which lies somnolent, deep within the reader.

In order to demonstrate what I mean by this, let's take a look at several haiku. These are all recent examples from *is/let:*

the here here
amidst tulips'
untidy deaths (David Boyer, 20 Feb 2015)

The iterative "here" is instrumentally untidy; death and immanence may be the context, yet "tulips' untidy" forms a crux: this personification upsets attempts at balancing dialectical equations (consider the presence of "tulips" contrasted with "untidy deaths"; the "here here" [presence itself] contrasted with "deaths" [death]; an "amidst," poised against an absence). The near non-narrative acts as embellishment: absence as ornament effects a disturbing, precarious sense of loss. The reader becomes less distanced even as the haiku and its author remain distant.

house calls
Strangelove
in the afternoon (Helen Buckingham, 16 Feb 2015)

This may be seen as a haiku of domestic disturbance, or domestic-semantic disturbance, due to the easy collocational familiarity of "house calls" "in the afternoon." The irruptive insertion of Strangelove collapses the normative Real via multiple puns and through mutual impossibilities—if we allow to co-exist the eponymous film (a perverse comedy concerning the atomic bomb, military-industrial complex and possible end of the world)—with sexual perversion (as "strange love"), and the boredom implicit in viewing said film on some nameless cable channel in the context of an anonymous ex-urbia on some perhaps out-of-work "afternoon." Here the cause for ironic humor is grief; an ever-aching emptiness almost filled. Finally it's the white spaces between words which become a focus: the strange love of that emptiness existing between collocations, film titles, and prepositional phrases. A cultural void, or societal numbness, is indicated.

A final example,

be mine —
alive for one
more war (Richard Gilbert, 30 Dec 2014)

is written perhaps for a lover, yet equally alludes to the recent Iraq and Afghan wars (and wars yet to occur). This haiku

senses union and catastrophe in brutal monosyllabic savagery but for the dyadic "alive" ("be mine" implying a couple)—clinging to life on the left side of the middle line. The only image that can exist here is one of language fragments taken out of life, organized by you, the distant reader—distant from the author's love and grief—indeed, perhaps the reader, as much as a lover, is ironically implied by "be mine"?

To Know Is Not Merely to Witness

Butler comments that even the universal is always relative to a particular people, time, and place—yet interestingly, haiku fragmentation and omission allow for a potent universalism, in that the universals of love, war, and death in all the haiku above are relativized by each individual reader, via subjective, idiosyncratic experience. In their various guises, these haiku might be seen as *all war:* yet each in a uniquely specific manner persuades a collapse of emotional distancing in the reader.

There is an additional effect found in many haiku, alluded to earlier as the avoidance of, or objectification of, the "I"—the avoidance of any overt insertion of the author as protagonist. This stylism was first presented artfully (as haiku or the haiku-esque) by the early modernists, in Imagism and elsewhere, and then brought into postwar popular culture primarily through the haiku translations of R.H. Blyth. The ethical dimension of haiku has been presented definitionally as *makoto* (an aesthetic of sincerity, truth) in Japanese, and since the 1970s from the Haiku Society of America (HSA), as an "essence . . . keenly perceived . . . nature [ ] linked to human nature";[11] and later as "the essence of an experience . . . intuitively linked to the human condition."[12] But what is *kenned* in "keenly"? What is being *linked* in the "linked to"? And, why does the HSA end both definitions with an *implicit* (or implicate) *sense of sincerity* in "human nature," or "the human condition"?

To know is not merely to witness. The objectification of a landscape or scene implicate with loss implies a nuanced sense of witnessing. As Maurice Blanchot indicates, "in the work of

mourning, it is not grief that works: grief keeps watch."[13] The vulnerability of the body is not instantiated in the reportage or "sketch" of a haiku scene, but in that which "keeps watch" over the life of the poem. To become sensitive to this poetic space or *topos,* one must yield, be "cut": then reader and poem open endlessly as flowers. Excellent haiku are both tender and harsh; their "images are imposed upon us . . . not of our making . . . an imposition," and so often indicate "also an ethical demand" (Butler, epigraph above). Whether the reader is passive and the poem active or the reverse, within the interplay of reader and work, one potential answer to grief moves us towards dissent. As Butler puts it, elsewhere: "If we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war."[14]

"Precarious Life"

In this regard, haiku often open us to an ethical sense of ourselves and the world, towards the "precarious life" and vulnerability of both bodies and words; towards an "ethics of cohabitation." A good haiku resists us—and we too may resist *the increasing commonality of "non-feeling"* in which questions such as,

> Is what is happening so far from me that I can bear no responsibility for it? Is what is happening so close to me that I cannot bear having to take responsibility for it? If I myself did not make this suffering, am I still in some other sense responsible to it?[15]

are no longer being posed, have exited social address. These are questions which repeatedly and insistently arise within the "frames," the hypotheticality or liminality of haiku. "In the register of the imaginary, the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language but also seeks a home in the body."[16] Even if the "street" is in this case an inner landscape, it is likewise true that we meet the world each day. Does haiku composition imply in its formal approach to literary production modes of ethical practice? Arguably, yes.

Notes

1. Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26.2 (2012): 134–51. (Emphasis mine.)
2. In her historical analysis, Butler, Maxine Elliot Professor in the departments of rhetoric and comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, discusses two approaches; she contrasts the thought of Emmanuel Levinas ("drawing on religious traditions . . . the ethical importance of passivity and receptivity"), with Hannah Arendt ("a social and political philosopher, adamantly secular, who emphasizes time and again the political value of action"). See Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability . . . ," 142.
3. Butler, in her *New Statesman* (August 30, 2009) interview with Nina Power, comments " . . . [on] the sudden instrumentalization of 'gay rights' or 'women's rights' to fight the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a move that suggests that we are actually fighting a culture, a religion, or an entire social structure rather than a particular state or its government." See http://bit.ly/1yCP6iR. Cf. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).
4. "War is 'framed' in the media so as to prevent us from recognising the people who are to be killed as living fully 'grievable' lives, like ours. That is the thesis" (*Frames of War*, book review, Steven Poole, *The Guardian,* 9 May 2009). "Journalists and newspapers were actively denounced for showing coffins of the American war dead shrouded in flags. Such images were not to be seen in case they aroused certain kinds of negative sentiment" (*Frames of War,* 65). "Media names any mode of presentation that relays to us some version of reality from the outside; it operates by means of a series of foreclosures that make possible what we might call its message and which impinges on us, by which I mean both the foreclosure—that is edited out, what is outside the margins—and what is presented. When we find ourselves in the midst of a responsive action of some kind, we are usually responding to what we have not chosen to see . . ." ("Precarious Life, Vulnerability . . . ," 136–37).
5. Bardo—In Tibetan Buddhism, a "'transitional state' or 'in-between state' or 'liminal state' . . . of existence . . . when one's consciousness is not connected with a physical body" (*Wikipedia*).
6. Discussed in Richard Gilbert, "Plausible Deniability: Nature as Hypothesis in English-language Haiku" available at: http://research.gendaihaiku.com/plausible.
7. All haiku quoted in this article are taken from *is/let,* an online journal of haiku, founded and edited by Scott Metz. Available at https://isletpoetry.wordpress.com.

8. Here the concept of cutting (sharp, potent, sudden, shocking, raw) as *savage* disjunction is not meant to imply aggression but rather an irruptive force analogous to storm, earthquake, volcano: natural phenomena which relativize the human. Mallarmé, in his noted aphorism, "The poet does violence to language in order to purify the words of the tribe," is, I believe, articulating much the same thing.
9. "Distancing" in psychology is defined positively as an aspect of language development, and pathologically as a collapse of words and their referents, in schizophrenia (cf. "Distancing (psychology)," *Wikipedia*).
10. This contrastive example was suggested by Michele Root-Bernstein (personal communication, 2 Apr 2015).
11. This is the "previous" HSA definition of haiku, composed "1973/1976." Available at: http://www.hsa-haiku.org/archives/HSA_Definitions_2004.html.
12. The "official" current 2004 HSA definition of haiku (endnote above, for the URL).
13. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster,* Trans. Ann Smock. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 19.
14. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), xii.
15. "To make this view plain, I want to suggest as a point of departure that images and accounts of war suffering are a particular form of ethical solicitation, one that compels us to negotiate questions of proximity and distance. They do implicitly formulate ethical quandaries: Is what is happening so far from me that I can bear no responsibility for it? Is what is happening so close to me that I cannot bear having to take responsibility for it? If I myself did not make this suffering, am I still in some other sense responsible to it?" (Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability . . . ," 135).
16. Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain." In Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock, eds., *Social Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 67–93.

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