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## DEATH AS CONFRONTATIONAL AND EMBRACING IN SYMBOLISM

Death was hardly a new subject in the visual arts in the late-nineteenth century, having been depicted often in Christian and mythological narratives and symbolically in still lifes, portraits and landscapes. The Symbolists of the late-nineteenth century were fascinated with death, probably more than any earlier artists, and depicted it often. Death was part of their interest in the bizarre, frightening, morbid, and mysterious. They usually depicted death as intimate, confrontational, disturbing and foreboding. Prior to Symbolism, depictions of death sustained a measure of emotional, spatial and physical detachment between the grim subject and the viewer. Death was depicted with the necessary facts and details and was meant to affect the viewer emotionally, but it was still somewhat remote and safely on the other side of the picture plane. The Symbolists often strove to eliminate this separation between the viewer and the dead,



between the living and the dead, as they pondered the mysteries of what death was. They were radical in how they depicted death because they were willing to explore at length a subject most people avoid. They showed death as a profound and mysterious event that was inescapable and always nearby. Death was regarded as something to be avoided and feared, or accepted, or perhaps occasionally even welcomed, depending on the circumstances of the one who was seen dying.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier depictions of death showed Christian, mythological or historical figures dying, being killed, or being mourned. The reality of death was shown by emphasizing the fact that someone was now dead, but the actual moment and experience of dying were not explored. Matthais Grunewald's *Crucifixion from the Isenheim Altarpiece* is one of the most gory depictions of Jesus's corpse ever painted. It vividly describes what happens to a dead body, but the emphatic reality is that Christ is not dying but has been dead for a while. Jesus being lowered from the cross and mourned were common subjects in Christian art, but even the most emotive paintings of these subjects, such as Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, Andrea Mantegna's *Dead Christ* and Titian's *Pietà* indicate that Jesus is already dead, not dying in front of us. Skulls, wilted leaves and petals on plants and flowers, and ripened fruit in still lifes symbolized death, frailty, the passing of time, and the inevitability of death.

However, something different which anticipated the Symbolist approach to death was occasionally seen. The small allegorical paintings about death by the German Renaissance painter and printmaker Hans Baldung Grien are proto-Symbolist in depicting death. *Death and the Maiden* and *The Three Stages of Life* each show a skeletal ghost in the background stalking a comely young woman. The eerie mood in Symbolist images of death was occasionally seen in Romanticism, which greatly influenced Symbolism. Henry Fuseli's two versions of *The Nightmare* make the viewer uneasy as a threatening, other-worldly horse and monkey, symbolic of demons, ghosts

and witches, surround a beautiful, restless and vulnerable woman. Francisco Goya explored death more than any artist before him. In *Fearful Folly*, the grim reaper towers over several frightened men who struggle to escape. Death as depicted in Realism and its precursors may have influenced how the Symbolists sought to make it seem so tangible and close. Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* was originally shocking because it showed the stark reality of the recent assassination of a political figure, of an actual event that was immediately historic. However, with his arm hanging over the side of his bath, his head flung back, and his mouth slightly open, Marat appears to be at the moment of death. His bloody corpse in the tub has not yet been discovered, so the attack was very recent. *The Raft of the Medusa* by Theodore Gericault is a scene of shipwrecked men, some of them dead or dying. In *The Dead Christ with Angels*, Edouard Manet shows a bruised and dirty Jesus propped up by angels as he seems to gasp his last breath. Depicting these figures in such brutally real and messy conditions upon their deaths made these paintings controversial when they were first exhibited. Claude Monet did a few heart-wrenching sketches of his wife Camille as she was near death from cancer. In this painting, she is so emaciated that she is skeletal and so near the end that Monet has painted her in wispy, pale tones which suggest she is disappearing in front of him. Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* emphasizes the bleak mood and mundane facts of the funeral of an ordinary person, someone who is not godly, holy or noble. The painting explores how we mourn and deal with the death of others, not how we understand death itself and how we deal with our own mortality. However, the inclusion of Courbet's recently deceased grandfather in the left background attending the funeral of his friend and in-law anticipates a major pictorial device of the Symbolists. Courbet's grandfather is inconspicuous and looks as real and alive as every other figure in the crowd.

Symbolism's distinctive manner of depicting death was probably influenced by horror fic-

tion and spirit photography. Literature was very much part of Symbolism, and horror classics such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) were written during the Symbolist era. The most acclaimed author of horror at this time was Edgar Allan Poe, who became internationally known in the late-nineteenth century and was very important to the Symbolists. His stories and poems were widely read and translated into numerous languages. His poem "The Raven" was especially popular. A few Symbolist artists produced illustrations and paintings based on Poe's work. **Odilon Redon** did illustrations of Poe's writings for publications of his works and Paul Gauguin did *Nevermore*, an 1897 painting in which he overtly referred to "The Raven" with the title and the dark blue bird on the window ledge. These illustrations of Poe's poem place the raven above and behind the figures, and try to make it a haunting, stalking presence. This placement of the bird is similar to where the approaching figure of death is often seen in Symbolist paintings, drawings and prints. In *Nevermore*, Gauguin's raven is hardly the most frightening bird ever illustrated, but the recumbent Tahitian girl is not really asleep because of the fear it instills in her. She lays on her bed with her eyes open as she glances behind her, perhaps hearing the raven utter his haunting declaration "Nevermore."

Spirit photography may have influenced the Symbolists, since it was of great interest to many people from the 1860s until the early-twentieth century. It was one of the first means possible for manipulating photographic exposures for expressive effects and conveying mood and feeling. Spirit photographs have the faded, otherworldly atmosphere found in many Symbolist works because they show figures that are supposedly ghosts as faintly visible figures or silhouettes. This evocative, hazy atmosphere is evident in such famous examples of spirit photography as William Mumler's manipulated photograph of Mary Todd Lincoln with the ghost of her husband beside her.

Although widely dismissed as fraudulent since they were first made, spirit photographs could have encouraged Symbolists to explore similar visual effects for similar emotional and psychological states of mind.

In Symbolism's more narrative and figurative scenes of death, the subject is given physical, even human-like form, often with feelings of confrontation, absorption, and embrace. In *Isle of the Dead* (1880), Arnold Böcklin depicts a white-caped figure standing next to a coffin on a small boat that is being rowed slowly by a second figure toward a small island with tall cypresses surrounded by jagged rocks. The painting refers to the Greek myth of Charon, the boatman who ferried the dead to the afterlife by crossing the River Styx. Cypress trees are frequently associated with death and are common in cemeteries. The island becomes an eerie, looming presence in which the cypress trees fill a dark, empty void that is ready to absorb, embrace or welcome the figures and, by implication, the viewer. Ferdinand Hodler's *Night* shows several nude men and woman sleeping on the ground and embracing as one is awakened and startled when a figure in a dark cape kneels over him. The figure is most likely death himself, who has come to take the man's soul. He engulfs the nude man's genitals as he bends over slowly, implying castration as well as death. Although most interpretations of this painting dwell on the castration, the possibility of imminent death, perhaps symbolically linked to castration, tends to be overlooked. However, interpreting this painting as death approaching is quite plausible considering the message written by Hodler on the back of the canvas: "Some who go peacefully to bed in the evening will not wake up in the morning."<sup>2</sup> It is not clear if this nightmare is becoming this man's reality; Hodler has deliberately left us this mystery to ponder.

Numerous Symbolist paintings and prints make death a shocking reality, one that is tantalizingly imminent, by connecting a person to death with unflinching directness and thorough exploration of the tragic and morbid. Sometimes the per-

son linked to death is an actual person, not a generic type, and occasionally he is the artist. In *The Sick Child* (1885-1887), Edvard Munch gives us an intimate view of a dying, bedridden girl with her mother or another female relative seated next to the bed, bent over and weeping. Although the subject was unusually blunt and personal, the prospect of death is not that startling visually because the figures are far from the viewer and the textures are fuzzy, so that the scene is not in focus and its emotional impact is somewhat blunted as a result. Munch suffered great emotional pain when his mother and sister Sophie died of tuberculosis several years apart when he was young. These tragic personal events not only led to these paintings but altered the direction of his artistic career. Munch painted these subjects several years after the actual events which inspired them occurred, but his painful memories were still fresh.

Death becomes strangely intimate and direct in Munch's *Self-Portrait in Hell* (1892). In this brushy canvas of fiery orange, yellow and brown, Munch is nude, seen from the hips up, and turned away slightly. He looks at us with gut-wrenching but silent fear as the flames of Hell engulf him. Munch's works were surprising in the late-nineteenth century for their powerful and sincere expression of his suffering, loss and unhappiness. This vision of his own death as eternal misery and punishment may have been influenced by the loss of family members, but it was probably also effected by the religious views of his father. The elder Munch was a practicing Lutheran with extreme ideas on sin and punishment. He ranted that damnation was almost certain for all humanity, including himself and his family, and that the ghost of his wife and mother of his children was watching and judging them from beyond the grave.<sup>3</sup> Emotional and psychological problems and incurable diseases such as tuberculosis were quite common in the Munch family. This self-portrait reveals fear, worry, uncertainty and self-doubt in a bold, forceful way that was virtually unprecedented. One notable precedent to Munch's painting is Michelangelo's inclusion of his self-

portrait in *The Last Judgment* as the face on the flayed skin of Saint Bartholomew. The meaning of this peculiar placement of Michelangelo's self-portrait has invited much speculation about his psychological and emotional issues. Böcklin conveys a similar relationship between the artist and death in his *Self-Portrait with Death Playing a Violin* of 1872. In this painting, Böcklin and a skeletal figure stalking him are seen up close, and the artist seems to have just become aware of the specter of death behind him, probably from the haunting funereal music he plays on his violin. The mood is quite sinister and suggests the inevitability of death regardless of one's place in the world, that for the artist the only possible immortality is through his art. In these self-portraits, the barrier separating the artist or viewer from death, which was traditionally the picture plane and the world created by the artist, is being eliminated because the artist seems to approach the spatial boundary of the picture plane by placing himself so close to it or by looking at the viewer.

One of the most innovative ways that death is depicted in Symbolism is by showing a figure, often a ghostly, demonic creature, approaching a person from the side and behind, almost as if surprising him. The figure of death may be shrouded in a cape and virtually unseen. It may be an animated skeletal figure that is naked or only partly clothed with a dark shroud. These figures associated with death are ghosts, demons or otherworldly escorts that will take the human to the afterlife. It is usually not specified if the next world is Heaven or Hell, but the dark, bleak mood suggests it is the latter. These ghostly figures usually lurk in darkness and when they encroach on the living, it is often by moving across the space behind the picture plane at angles that suggest they might break through it and enter our world. Consequently, their approach toward their victim extends to the viewer, who once seemed to be safe outside of the pictorial space. This change toward a more blunt, confrontational, absorbing and unsettling connection with death is something radically new that is an under-appreciated aspect of



Symbolism. The change is somewhat comparable to what William Rubin described in 1983 as the shift from the “narrative” to the “iconic” in early Analytic Cubism, in particular the paintings of Pablo Picasso.<sup>4</sup> The visual change is considerable, but the emotional and psychological intensity achieved by the greater closeness of the viewer and the dead is even more profound. One of the first times this appears in Symbolism is Böcklin’s *Self-Portrait with Death*; it became more common by the early-1880s. This compositional format is quite similar to Greun’s paintings of death from the 1510s. It made death a palpable, unsettling, real presence. In his 1897 watercolor *Death Listens*, Finnish Symbolist Hugo Simberg depicts death as a dressed skeleton who listens as a young boy plays his violin before he claims his soul. Although we are initially shocked to see a skeleton, not to mention one who is dressed and soothed by music, we are not really afraid but slightly perplexed by the scene. By keeping the skeleton and the boy parallel to the picture plane and separated by the table and by illuminating the room with a bright, even light, the creeping dread that death usually elicits is greatly diminished. Also, the viewer still feels safe on the other side of the picture plane because none of the forms depicted threatens to breach it.

Gauguin explored the spirituality and mysticism of the Tahitians, including their ideas on death, in his 1892 *Spirit of the Dead Watching (Manau Tupapau)*. This painting was inspired by Gauguin’s discovery upon returning to his hut one day that his teenage lover Tehemana was laying on her bed in fear of dead spirits she believed were in the room. This was a common aspect of Tahitian religious and mystical thinking. Gauguin found this intriguing, even amusing, and did this painting about it.<sup>5</sup> Here we see a dead spirit as a simplified, flattened figure on the far left of the composition, dressed in black with a brown face and large eyes, who is peering through the door, staring at the girl who does not see him but senses his presence. The figure is almost cartoon-like, and yet there is something sinister about him.

The dark tones of purple, violet and blue in the room describe dim lighting and enhance the mood of mystery and death. By the time Gauguin did this painting, the basic compositional format for such a narrative was widely used among his fellow Symbolists. He did not invent it but he made it unforgettable.

Redon used this compositional format numerous times in his *Noirs* of the 1880s and 1890s. The *Noirs* were charcoal and pastel drawings and lithographs that were moody, shadowy images of the bizarre, frightening and unusual. Some were illustrations for various short stories, novels and poems, including Gustave Flaubert’s *Temptation of Saint Anthony* and the writings of Edgar Allen Poe. Redon’s early drawing, *Faust and Mephistopheles* of 1880, uses the device of death approaching from behind, but does so rather awkwardly. His illustrations for *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* done in the mid-1890s are much more evocative. Number 18 of 1896 shows a despondent Anthony with his head tilted while Satan appears as a dark, bat-winged figure behind him. The two are in a brief dialogue, as Anthony asks what is the reason for life and death and Satan replies that there is none. This metaphysical uncertainty and religious skepticism is not surprising in the era of Friedrich Nietzsche. Number 20 shows death as a caped skeleton with a female flying around him. Death says: “It is I who make you serious. Let us embrace.” The comment is perplexing since we initially expect it is spoken to Anthony, but he is not shown. Death’s statement seems more logical if the comment is understood as directed to the flying figure, which might represent a free and living spirit. If they embrace, and Death gains control over her, he succeeds in taking a human soul. In addition to the theme of imminent death, sexual seduction is also implied and connected to the moment of death. Similar coiled serpentine figures appear in Redon’s lithograph no. 3 for *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* from 1889 captioned with Death saying “My irony surpasses all others,” and his 1905 painting of a very similar figure, *The Green Death*.<sup>6</sup>

The Czech Symbolist Auguste Bromse did *Death and the Girl*, a series of six illustrations, in 1901. These aquatints depict death as a living skeleton in a shroud stalking, taunting, and then claiming the soul of a woman in the middle of a dark, lonely night. They reflect how Symbolists thought at length about death with a morbid obsession and a fascination for the bizarre and horrific. Bromse used symbolic and narrative details, careful sequencing of events, Symbolism's unique pictorial devices, and the manipulation of light and shadow to create fear and dread. The theme of death being inevitable and close by is conveyed with iconographic details that were well established traditions by the late-nineteenth century, including the figure of death and everyday reminders of the passing of time and the physical, sensory pleasures of life such as musical instruments. However, Bromse has made them more shocking and disturbing by dwelling on them, showing the narrative not in one scene but in several that are sequentially related and thus reinforce one another, by carefully describing figures and objects no matter how obvious or obscure they are. No other Symbolist work explores the approach of death in such meticulous detail, and with such a powerfully evocative mood, as we see death stalk his prey of this particular night. Death is shown as a tall skeleton dressed in a long robe who is slowly getting closer to the unsuspecting beautiful young woman, following her in a park at night, playing a violin to measure the passing of time and taunt her, following the girl into her home, entrancing her with his music, and then claiming her soul and committing her body to her grave with the assistance of mysterious muscular and mostly nude man. Such a carefully developed narrative series about death was unheard of before Symbolism.<sup>7</sup>

As the Symbolist movement progressed, some artists made death more violent and strident. Belgian artist Jan Toorop depicted death as a semi-corporeal presence that is antagonistic, shrill and harrowing in his 1892 pencil drawing, *O Grave, Where Is Thy Victory?* In this meticu-

lously decorative, tonal illustration, intangible spirits fly over an open grave as gnarled hands reach out of the ground to grab and pull at the deceased who is laying on a funeral bier awaiting burial. The rhythmic, curving lines of many forms, including the spirits, and the harmonized array of gold and dark brown tones create fear and melancholy in this dark, murky scene. The drawing depicts a literal confrontation with death as a speaking, moving, violent presence. Toorop has used the same narrative device as Redon, that of including dialogue in the illustration, to create a verbal exchange between death and his intended target.

The Symbolist fascination with death lasted well into the twentieth century, although it gradually lost much of its ambiguity and mystery. In his 1911 painting *Death and Life*, Gustav Klimt depicts death as a skeleton wearing an elaborately decorated cloak and holding a scythe. He is looking at the young people who twist and turn amorously in their sleep in front of him. He is dangerously close to them and ready to claim whomever he wants by swinging his scythe. In her 1934 print *Death Seizing a Child*, Käthe Kollwitz depicts a frantic mother clutching a baby to her chest as a skeletal ghoul looms over her and tries to take her child. The scene is deeply tragic and disturbing. However, the emotional subtlety of earlier Symbolism which made scenes of death so compelling, is now mostly gone. Since Kollwitz was more concerned with self-expression than the more philosophical ideas on life and death, she was more an Expressionist than a Symbolist. However, this print demonstrates how Symbolism and Expressionism were sometimes closely related, and how the latter came from the former.

Symbolism ended early in the twentieth century as Art Nouveau, Fauvism, and Expressionism were born. The combined effect of these new movements, with their different expressive goals and thematic interests, was to push the ghosts, demons and spirits of Symbolism into the history of modernist art, where they can still be found and experienced today.

## Notes

1 Most studies of Symbolism have been formalist, stylistic and monographic. Most of the artists studied at length have been French, even though the movement was widespread across Europe and the United States. The artists and artworks that were most radical and innovative in style have been treated rather preferentially. Hence, the most studied artists include Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch and Odilon Redon. Iconographic studies are still not that common. Contextualizing studies that examine the social, political, philosophical and cultural influences have been more scarce. Books such as Michelle Facos' *Symbolist Art in Context* are part of a growing trend to reverse these entrenched biases.

2 Peter Selz, et al. *Ferdinand Hodler* (Berkeley: Art Museum of University of California–Berkeley, 1972): 30-31; Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009): 22.

3 J. P. Hodin, *Edvard Munch* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993. Repr. of 1972 ed.): 11-13.

4 William Rubin, "From Narrative to 'Iconic' in Picasso: The Buried Allegory in *Bread and Fruit-dish on a Table* and the Role of *Les Demoiselles de Avignon*," *Art Bulletin* 65.4 (Dec. 1983): 615-649.

5 Francoise Cachin, et al. *Gauguin* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1988): 279-282.

6 Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Temptation of Saint Redon: Biography, Ideology and Style in the "Noirs" of Odilon Redon*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 214-222. In his detailed interpretation of *Temptation of Saint Anthony No. 20*, Eisenman emphasizes the erotic overtones of the print and discusses the iconographic traditions that support his claim for the great importance of the erotic meaning. Without needing to dispute Eisenman, I contend that the erotic aspect is not as important as he believes.

7 Otto M. Urban, et al., *Decadence in Morbid Colors: Art and the Idea of Decadence in the Bohemian Lands, 1880-1914*. (Arbor Vitae, 2006); *August Bromse (1873-1925): Ein Graphiker in der Spannung zwischen Symbolism und Expressionismus*. A set of these aquatints is in the collection of the National Gallery of the Czech Republic in Prague.

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