The Disappearance of the Dead From Real and Imaginary Epitaphs of Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century England

Thomas Dutoit

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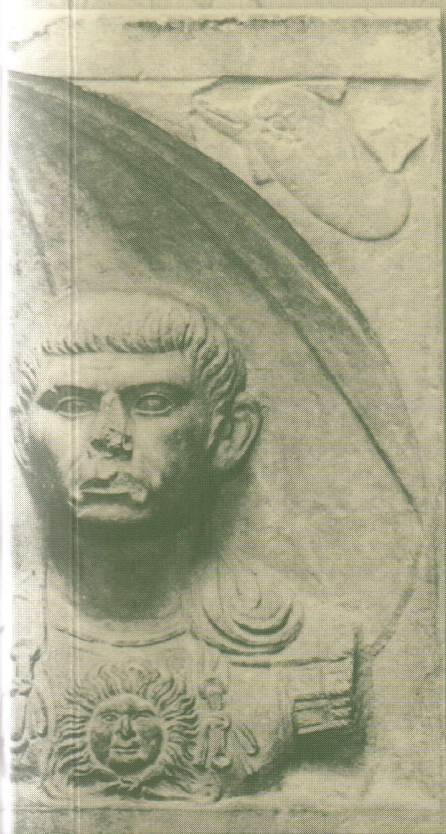
LES PIERRES
DE L'OFFRANDE

ACTES EDITES PAR ANNIE SARTRE-FAURIAT

Cet ouvrage intitulé lui aussi «Les pierres de l'offrande» constitue le deuxième volet des communications prononcées au colloque de Clermont-Ferrand les 9-11 décembre 1998 en l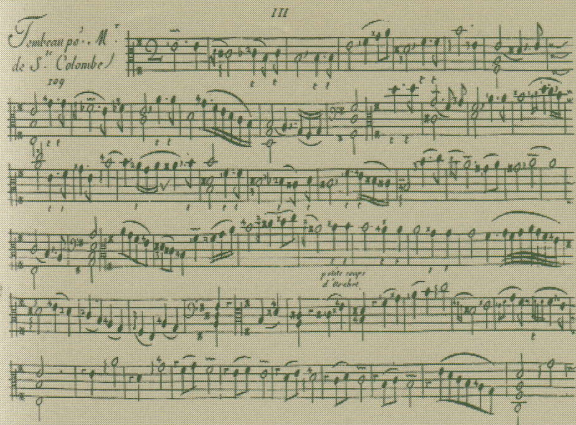'honneur de Christoph W. Clairmont. Il se distingue du précédent, exclusivement consacré aux stèles du monde grec classique, par la diversité des époques et des approches qui constituaient l'originalité de ce colloque.

Les analyses des spécialistes du monde oriental et méditerranéen dans l'Antiquité, par-delà des descriptions de stèles différentes, propres à leurs domaines géographiques, ont mis en évidence la fonction commune de celles-ci comme révélateur du niveau social ou culturel du défunt ou de sa famille: la stèle funéraire joue, la plupart du temps, un rôle qui va bien au-delà du simple monument votif. Ceci se manifeste clairement à travers le contenu des épitaphes, quand s'établit un lien entre épigraphie et littérature, entre représentation iconographique et genre littéraire. Les musicologues et spécialistes de la littérature moderne et contemporaine ont révélé quant à eux les diverses formes prises par la stèle pour parler de la mort et des morts: Stèles de sons des tombeaux en musique, stèles d'images photographiques, stèles imaginaires, ou stèles de mots érigées à l'absent et mettant en scène la biographie, la fiction ou servant de support symbolique au récit.

Par-delà les époques, les lieux, les méthodes et les supports, la stèle «pierre de l'offrande» est donc, non seulement un moyen de perpétuer le souvenir des disparus, mais aussi pour ceux qui sont encore vivants une façon de manifester leur regret, leurs sentiments et leur sens de la vie.

AKANTHVS

LES PIERRES DE L'OFFRANDE
AUTOUR DE L'ŒUVRE DE CHRISTOPH W. CLAIRMONT

ACTES EDITES PAR ANNIE SARTRE-FAURIAT
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AKANTHVS

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Commemorating nobility

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Sonnes, seeke not me amonge these polish'd stones:
these only hide part of my flesh, and bones:
which, did they neere so neate, or proudly dwell,
will all turne dust, & may not make me swell.

Let such as justly have out-liv'd all prayse,
trust in the tombes, their care-full freinds do rayse;
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And teach your nephewes it to aemulate:
it will be matter lowd inoughe to tell
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SIR CHARLES CAVENDISH TO HIS POSTERITIE[4]

M arble, weepe, for thou dost cover
A dead beautie under-neath thee,
R ich, as nature could bequeath thee:
G rant then, no rude hand remove her
A ll the gazers on the skies
R ead not in faire heavens storie,
E xpresser truth, or truer glorie,
T hen they might in her bright eyes.
R are, as wonder, was her wit;
A nd like Nectar every flowing:
T ill time, strong by her bestowing,
C onquer'd hath both life and it.
L ife, whose griefe was out of fashion,
I n these times. Few so have ru'de
F ate, in a brother. To conclude,
F or wit, feature, and true passion,
E arth, thou has not such another. (8:39)

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Jonson's poem is engraved in gold letters on the three horizontally aligned black tablets below the crown of arm (fig 1).[5] While the Cavendish monument celebrates the family's «permanence» through the family arms, the horizontal effigies of the father and mother (still alive at its construction, and thus life-like), the kneeling effigies of his three children (two of whom were alive), as well as the family's utter unity, be it among the dead and the living, or among the ultimately all dead members, the ventriloquism of Jonson's epitaph is such that it makes Cavendish proclaim that in fact his life was his real monument (»I made my life my monument,» ll. 7). The epitaph devalorizes the stone monument: «there's no materiall that endures» (ll. 9). Yet Jonson's poem suggests that the inscription is adequate to the life-as-monument: there is not «yet» an inscription like» «my lyfe.» Such «inscription» is all that remains to be written: «Write but that» (ll. 9). Such writing, such inscription, in short, such an epitaph as is Jonson's, will be better than any unenduring «matierall» because it will be a message, a «matter lowd inoughe to tell not when I die'd, but *how* I livd» (ll. 11-12). Jonson's poem allows his patron to indulge in the dangerously non-Protestant iconophiliac monumentalization – thereby keeping up aristocratic social status beyond death – because it also provides the Protestant iconoclastic textual disclaimer of such monumentalization.

Jonson's verbal acrostic is itself the monument, especially given that it was never to be inscribed on any physical stone. A pseudo-inscriptional epitaph, it makes one think of monuments while also suggesting the sufficiency, if not superiority, of verbal memorials. If the Cavendish «materiall» monument is undone by the verbal «matter,» the verbal Ratcliffe poem would be living matter: «M arble, weepe.» Whereas the Cavendish poem ventriloquizes the dead man, the Ratcliffe epitaph maintains a male voice to speak about the woman. The Cavendish poem asserts the superiority of the message over the monument, but the Ratcliffe poem uses a stylistic trick making its form, its monumentalized shape, be its content. Both poems are however the same as far as the assumption of a pious, obedient reader: the imperatives in the former («seeke,» «Let,» «Write,» ll. 1, 5, 9), and, in the latter, the all inclusive «A ll the gazers on the skies / R ead not … / E xpresser truth» (ll. 5-6), take for granted the devotion of the survivors vis-à-vis the dead.

The epitaph is typically a little poem. Limited space of tombstone meant short poems.[6] Changes in the form of the tombs – from inscriptions on the edges of medieval tombchests to those on vertical panels behind the sepulcher – as well as the radical decrease in the use of effigies led to an increase in text, itself occasioned moreover by iconoclastic Protestantism and increased literacy.[7] The possi-

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5 For a fascinating reading of the whole monument, see SCODEL, 1991, p. 25-37.
6 In his *Tract upon Tombstones* (1843), the Rev. F.E. Paget recalls the rule of the epitaph: it «should be characterized» «by a disposition to say *too little* rather than *too much*» (qtd. in BURGESS, 1963, p. 33).
7 See SCODEL, 1991, p. 51, and KEMP, 1980, p. 83. For an overview of the architectural styles of monuments from 1590 to 1800, see BURGESS, 1963, p. 112-153. Writing in 1634, John Canne expresses the Scottish-

Monument of Sir Charles Cavendish, d. 1617. Church of St. Mary, Bolsover, Derbyshire.
Permission granted by National Monuments Record

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bility of longer inscriptions triggered however a *literary* use of non-necessary brevity, of pithy, precious wording. This literary use of brevity coincided with the appearance of epitaphs on children, of which Jonson was a pioneer: the size of the dead child, its bursting but unrealized potential, its spiritual perfection (having no need of infantile baptism in Protestant culture), all made the child a choice trope for the epitaph form itself. The first «major poetic epitaph in English upon a child» (SCODEL, 1991, p. 76) is Jonson's «On My First Daughter»:

Here lyes to each her parents ruth,
MARY, the daughter of their youth:
Yet, all heavens gifts, being heavens due,
It makes the father, lesse, to rue.
At sixe moneths end, she parted hence
With safetie of her innocence;
Whose soul heavens Queene,
(whose name shee beares)
In comfort of her mothers teares,
Hath plac'd amongst her virgin-traine:
Where, while that sever'd doth remaine,
This grave partakes the fleshly birth.
Which cover lightly, gentle earth.

«On My First Daughter» (8:33-34)

The pithy pathic punch of the first two lines, reworking ancient epigrams and Renaissance imitation thereof, allow the epitaph already to have ended, having said all that can or need be said. Such concision is reinforced, however, by the pun on «ruth»/ Ruth, and «Mary»/ merry. Whereas the parents presumably gave the name «Mary» so she'd be *merry*, they see their plan backfire, for the child would seemingly be more appropriately named «Ruth.» Yet such a Ruth is only the ruth of parents, since Mary is now with Virgin Mary, and thus truly merry. It is not only thus that the small is great, the sad happy, but that the modest has dignity, for Jonson's daughter buried without material monument is accorded the true aristocratic status of «gentle» person. Dignity is not that of the living gentlemen and gentlewomen, but the unostentatiously commemorated dead.

If Mary was the child of «parents,» Jonson's son occludes the role of the mother:

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
  My sinne was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy,
Seven yeeres tho'wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
  Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O, could I loose all father, now. For why
  Will man lament the state he should envie?
To have so soone scap'd worlds, and fleshes rage,
  And, if no other miserie, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say here doth lye
  BEN. JONSON his best piece of *poetrie*.
For whose sake, hence-forth all his vowes be such,
  As what he loves may never like too much.

«On My First Sonne» (8:41)

The Catholic Jonson's son, buried without ceremony after dying during a plague of which the mother informed Jonson during his extended absence from home, is thus mourned in an abstract and profane way, yet the poem attests to poetry's supplantation of either corporeal burial or priestly ceremony. Using yet innovating upon the elegy-epitaph composite form (Catullus, Ronsard; cf. Scodel, p. 94-95), the first nine elegiac lines take leave of the bodily son linked with the mother, while the epitaph links father and son through the proper name.

Indeed, «Benjamin» in Hebrew denotes the name Jacob conferred upon his youngest son, and means «son of the right hand» (*Genesis* 35:18). «Child of my right hand,» BEN JONSON is that poetry made by Ben Jonson. The epitaph secures the bond between living and dead, confounding even the distinction as well as the hierarchy, through the play on names. The «soft *peace*» (l. 9) lies together with the «best *piece*.» If the «gentle earth» conferred a dignity upon the ultimately unaris-

tocratic daughter, the pun on «peace»/«piece» links the living father and the dead son, conflating the distinction and temporality of the living and the dead, even making the latter be premininent. This confounding of the boundary between the living and the dead is nowhere more striking than in John Donne's epitaph on himself, who moreover clearly privileges the dead over the living:

Omnibus
My Fortune and my choice this custome break,
When we are speechlesse grown, to make stones speak,
Though no stone tell thee what I was, yet thou
In my graves inside see what thou art now:
Yet thou'art not yet so good, till us death lay
To ripe and mellow here, we'are stubborne Clay.
Parents make us earth, and soules dignifie
Us to be glasse; here to grow gold we lie.
Whilst in our soules sinne bred and pamper'd is,
Our soules become wormeaten carkases;
So we our selves miraculously destroy.
Here bodies with lesse miracle enjoy
Such priviledges, enabled here to scale
Heaven, when the Trumpets ayre shall them exhale.
Heare this, and mend thy selfe, and thou mendst me,
By making me being dead, doe good to thee,
And thinke me well compos'd, that I could now
A last-sick houre to syllables allow.[8]

In the history of the English epitaph, Donne's poem is important in two ways. First, the epitaph is an *innovation* and second, it is without heir. An innovation because if speaking stones in *memento mori* traditionally warn the reader of the death awaiting the reader, Donne chooses (»my choice») not only to «break» the «custome» of the «stones» that «speak» but also that of death being simply the inevitable *future* event. For Donne, the reader and the living in general are already dead: «In my graves inside see what thou art now.» For Donne, death is happening, is the present, is presence in the sense of living. Mortals are only alive insofar as they are already given to parasitical decomposition, «wormeaten carkases.»[9] What is more, the living-dead are «not yet so good» as the dead-dead, because the dead body in the grave has already started the ascent to «scale Heaven.» Second, in the chiasmatic relation of dead speaker and living reader (»mend,» «thy selfe,» «thou,» «mendst»), Donne gives a Catholic conception of the reciprocal salvatory relation between living and dead, that is, suggests that the living can communicate with or influence the dead. Protestant theology however invariably maintained the lack of contact between dead and living. In light of the English Protestant crackdown on Catholicism throughout the seventeenth century (excepting James II's indulgences of 1685-87), Donne's epitaph could have no future.

What was in fact bequeathed from one generation to another throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century English epitaph was the epithet «honest.»

Calvinist disapproval of ceremony: «The Nonconformists will have the dead to be buried in this sort, (holding no other way lawful), namely, that it be conveyed to the place of burial, with some honest company of the church, without either singing or reading, yea, without all kinds of cermony heretofore used, other than that the dead be committed to the grave, with such gravity and sobriety as those that be present may seem to fear the judgments of God [...]; thus do the best and right reformed churches bury their dead, without any ceremonies of praying or preaching at them.» *A Necessity of Separation from the Church of England,* qtd. GITTINGS,1984, p. 51-52.
8 From «Epitaph on Himself. *To the Countesse of Bedford,»* John Donne, CAREY, 1996, p. 146.
9 In *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), Donne writes, «I *am dead,* I was *borne dead,* and from the first laying of these *mud-walls* in my *conception,* they have *moldred* away, and the whole course of *life* is but an *active death,»* p. 96.

Honest to God and Master

The epitaph was a site of ideological inscription, unsurprisingly. If we span a period from 1620 to 1810, spotlighting particularly the nearly simultaneous rise to institutional power of Puritanism (from 1640 to 1660) and that of Arminianism (during James I and Charles I, especially from 1620 to 1640),[10] it is possible to trace the evolution of the word «honest» in epitaphs from being a synonym of Puritan as well as a satire thereof, to being a code name for proto-communist Levellers or other Civil War revolutionararies, and finally, some 150 years later, to being a condescending nickname of the docile servant. The epitaph suggests those values that society desires and fears.

In epitaphs, «the ‹honest› man emerges first and foremost as a challenge to the ‹great› man,» writes Scodel (1991, p. 140). Humanist thought made the humble «honest man,» rather than the great aristocrat, be synonymous with the «virtuous man.» With the rise not only of Protestantism, but also of the rigorous Calvinist stripping down of ostentation, goodness came to be recognized by plainness, the honorable by the syntagm «a plain honest man» (SCODEL, 1991, p. 141n2; cf. UNDERDOWN, 1978, p. 190). Captured in numerous epitaphs and monuments, the conflict that divided England from the Bishops' Wars of 1637-39 through the Civil War of the 1640's on through the Interregnum up to the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 was the conflict between the increased insistence by the Anglican Church of Charles I and Bishop Laud upon ceremony, protocol and vertical hierarchy, on the one hand, and the directly related increased demand by the alliance of Dissenters (Presbyterians, Independents, as well as Levellers, Diggers, etc.[11]) for precisely the eradication of ceremony and protocol and for a more horizontal social organization. Seventeenth century epitaphs are the site of this division, as for e.g. that penned by James Shirley:

For them that leave no monument
Behind them good, much gold is spent
To build a tomb: the gentle son
Will turn his father into stone,
And on a cushion carved fair
Cut him into form of prayer,
And in jet beneath command
To be writ in golden hand
(If no other good beside,)
His worship's name, and when he died.
But when did charity find room
To raise an honest parson's tomb,
Or bestow upon his hearse
Figure, or a marble verse?
Then let her, whom he did trust
With life and love, enclose his dust
At the cost of double mit,
(the widow's all,) and underwrite
This epitaph, which she'd have read
To shew her duty to the dead.

Epitaph inscribed on a small piece of marble.

Dating from the 1620's or 1630's, this poem clearly opposes the «good» to «gold» («no ... good, much gold,» ll. 1-2; «golden hand / ... no other good,» ll. 8-9), the humble to the rich (»an *honest* parson's tomb» to «the *gentle* son / Will turn his father into stone,» ll. 12, 3-4). Opposed to the ostentation of the marble monument inscribed «in jet» and in «gold» (ll. 7-8) mimetically carved to show a life-like kneeler («form of prayer,» ll. 6), the humility of pious memory and the true «rich»ness (ll.26) consist in a «shew» of «duty» that comes from «charity» (ll. 20, 11) and that eschews excessive figuration («no *more* marble» than «*a* small *piece*,» ll. 21). The paring down of the monument and of the epitaph, result of the ethical valorization of the «honest» and the critique of the «gentle,» occurs in the transition from the mimetic sculpting of recumbent effigy to that of living kneelers and finally to the anti-mimetic stonecutting of the hori-

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10 On how Arminiasm created Puritan institutional power, see RUSSELL, 1990, p. 58-82.
11 TUTTLE, 1989.

No more marble let him have;
He hath treasure in his grave,
And his piety will survive,
To keep his memory alive:
A glorious nothing it would be,
To say, his tomb were rich, not he.

zontal floor slab. If the shift from recumbent effigy, which were life-size, to living kneelers, which were often miniature, reflected an economic and cultural change, given that more people were able to afford some monumentalization of their dead but in a way taking less volume in the diminishing free space of the church, the shift from living kneeler to floor slab reflected the unpresumptious iconoclasm characteristic of a Puritanism following the Second Commandment and renouncing the vanity of reducing the dead to a representation of how they were when alive, no matter how devoutly in prayer.

English civil war was the division between the gentle and the honest. Two quotes from Oliver Cromwell stage, from the «honest» point of view, this division:

I had rather have a plain russet-coated captain that knows what he fights for, and loves what he knows, than that which you call a *gentleman* and is nothing else. I honour a gentleman that is so indeed. Qtd. in FRASER, 1973, p. 91

If you choose godly *honest* men to be captains of horse, honest men will follow them.... A few honest men are better than numbers. Qtd. in SCODEL, 1991, p. 159; UNDERDOWN, 1978, p. 188

The honest, moreover, came to be identified with the «godly,» namely those Independants like Cromwell as well as Parliamentarians and populist groups who considered themselves the instruments of God on earth. Associated with the «saints,» they were harnessed in the 1640's in discourses and actions for egalitarian democracy and against Charles I's status quo demands. By the late 1640's and early 1650's, however, the terms came to designate those New Model Army leaders who won the second Civil War, controlled power against populist proponents of egalitarian democracy (TUTTLE, 1989, p. 145), and stepped up the stripdown of the aristocratic and Anglican Church land and wealth.

Between 1642 and 1660 – during the military rule of England which systematically used the soldier power of egalitarian democratic forces incarnated by groups such as the Levellers to consolidate the hold of the military oligarchic rule against Royalist sympathetic sectors, but which also systematically repressed the same egalitarian democratic forces whenever the Royalist forces were weak, ultimately eradicating the egalitarian groups after also executing Charles I – «honest» in epitaphs either denoted the godly, that is, those precisely opposed to the «gentle» people, or satirized the proto-communist godly in epitaphs written by Royalists who saw the godly as anarchists, to boot.[12] This long period, which saw the destruction of Royalist funerary monuments by Republicans, and vice versa,[13] ushered in the era of the disrespect for the dead which was tantamount to a sea-change in the relation between dead and living, modulated gradually with the interiorization of the dead in the

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12 An epitaph from 1683 commemorating one David Baxter who died in 1678 at the age of 97 yokes the honest and the godly: «Below this stone doth David Baxter lie, / Prais'd in his life for wit and *honesty*; / A *godly* man and well belov'd was he, / By persons all of high and low degree: / His worth and merit we can not decide, / In peace he liv'd, in Christ he did confide.» *A Collection of Epitaphs and Monumental Inscriptions, chiefly in Scotland*, 1834, p. 201.

13 On the destruction of funerary and church monuments, see ASTON, 1988, p. 62-95, PHILLIPS, 1973, p. 183, NORRIS, 1977, vol. 1, p. 260-263 and SCODEL, 1991, p. 202-248.

late eighteenth century, and leading to the epitaph dead as a form by 1815. Prior to that end, the word «honest» came in epitaphs to be the epithet designating servants, used by «gentlemen» condescendingly to record the extent to which «order» had been returned to society. Thus the rector John Skinner could commemorate a day laborer with an epitaph on a churchyard tombstone: «Here lieth James Britten / who was what every true Briton should be, / An honest, Good Man, / he died December 17, 1810. Aged 70. / Reader Mayest thou both live and die as he did.»[14] The «godly» (but in a different sense) rector Skinner could praise the «good» man Britten for being «honest» (it too in a different sense) for being what every *truly* honest Briton ought dutily to be, namely an obedient servant.

Respecting the quiet space of death

In the age of the Civil War and Interregnum, poets no longer attempt to communicate, by commemorating, the virtues necessary to be imitated, but forswear the present, unedifiable age, seeking merely to protect the dead from the chaos and oblivion of the present turmoil. If the epitaph was before Robert Herrick, who wrote in the 1640's to 1660's, a public genre, with and after him it began its turn inward to privacy. In his slender «Upon his departure hence,» Herrick envisions the grave as the sole private property so dear to seventeenth century man (especially those beleaguered landowners forced to give up their dearly inherited lands by force or by depression of the rents they lived off):

Thus I,
Passe by,
And die:
As One,
Unknown,
And gon:
I'm made
A shade
And laid
I'th grave,
There have
My Cave.
Where tell
I dwell,
Farewell.[15]

Rejecting the address to the «passerby,» an until then utter *passage obligé* of the epitaph, Herrick usurps for himself such place: «Thus I, / Passe by.» The passerby who is supposed typically to have a proleptic experience of his own death is collapsed into the poetic I, testifying already to a retreat from contact with the external world. Such an eclipse, staged on the page by the truncated line of one disyllabic foot, remains a proleptic experience for the reader foretelling his passing away. Eclipsed by death as retreat into both the grave and the cave, the poem confounds the space of death with the primitive home. In an era of lost possessions, in what was seen by conservatives as the utter disrespect for hereditary property, Herrick's «Upon his departure hence» cuts its losses in its final conservative conceited gesture of claiming the grave as home: «There *have* / My Cave.»

The incessantly re-written Herrick epitaph (he wrote his own dozens of times), always without inscription on stone («his precise grave site at Dean Prior, where he was buried in 1674, is unknown,» Scodel 186), invariably proclaims by anticipation having found in the space of

Here I have found a Chamber fit,
(God and good friends be thankt for it)
Where if I can a lodger be
A little while from Tramplers free;
At my up-rising next, I shall,
If not requite, yet thank ye all.
(ll. 7-12, H-306)

14 John Skinner, *Journal of a Somerset Rector, 1803-1834,* 1984, p. 59; qtd. SCODEL,1991, p. 365.
15 *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick,* 1963, p. 475. Hereafter, reference in text as H-PAGE number.

death that space protected from the irreverent
society that no longer respects the social order
that graves would secure against change, as in
«On himself»:

Laudian parson, supporter of the Royalist cause, Herrick was stripped of his position as Dean Prior
in 1647 by Parliament. Diametrically opposed to those at the height of their influence in the years
1645-51, notably the visionary of the group of communists called the «Diggers,» Gerrard
Winstanley, Herrick can look only to the grave as that property so proper to man that not even – he
hopes – the Diggers would dare to despoil it. We have sandwiched nonetheless Winstanley's 1652
call for dispersion of even this property between two last-ditch attempts by Herrick to salvage the
grave-as-home:

«The troublesome times»	from *The Law of Freedom*	*The pillar of Fame*

O! Times most bad,
Without the scope
      Of hope
Of better to be had!
 	
Where shall I goe,
Or wither run
      To shun
This publique overthrow?
 	
No places are
(This I am sure)
      Secure
In this our wasting Warre.
 	
Some storms w'ave past;
Yet we must all
      Down fall,
And perish at the last.
H-596
	O death where art thou? wilt thou not
	tidings send?
	I fear thee not, thou art my loving friend.
	Come take this body and scatter it in the
	Four,
	That I may dwell in One, and rest in
	peace once more.[16]
		Fames pillar here, at last, we set,
		Out-during *Marble, Brasse,* or *Jet,*
		   Charm'd and enchanted so,
		   As to withstand the blow
		      Of o v e r t h r o w:
		     Nor shall the seas
		      Or OUTRAGES
		     Of storms orebear
		     What we up-rear,
		     Tho Kingdoms fal,
		   This pillar never shall
		   Decline or waste at all;
		But stand for ever by his owne
		Firme and well fixt foundation.
		H-1129

Whereas Winstanley envisions death as the realization of the communist dream of utter distribution
or dispersal, be it of the body or of wealth, Herrick sees the Civil War as a «publique overthrow,»
precisely the revolution desired by Winstanley. Such anarchy or disrespect for not only the property
of the living but for the social order embodied by graveyards and the ostentatious vertical hierarchy
that perpetuates funerary monuments, is glimpsed by Herrick as the utter dissolution of things («we
must all / Down fáll, / And perish at the last»). Against such chaos, he uses the the typographic *mise-
en-page* of the poem as pillar itself (of society? of memory?) itself whose convex shape inverts the
concave shape of an urn while yet maintaining the principle of an architectural institution that with-
stands utter destitution.

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16 *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley,* 1941, p. 519; qtd. SCODEL, 1991, p. 183.

The Civil Wars were translated in epitaphs into utter anxiety about the future as a time without memory of the past, without therefore tradition or inheritance, those two pillars of aristocracy and of its very practice of inscribing epitaphs in stone. The anxiety before such erasure is attested in Sir Edward Giles' epitaph from 1642:

No trust to metals nor to marbles when
These have their fate and wear away as men:
Times, titles, trophies, may be lost and spent:
But vertue rears th'eternal monument.
What more than these can tombs and tombstones pay?
But here's the sunset of a tedious day;
These two asleep are, I'll but be undrest
And soe to bed; pray with us all good rest. (RAVENSHAW, 1878, p. 180)

The necessity for the aristocracy, already in the 1630's financially inferior to the non-aristocratic London merchants, to go broke paying for Charles I, his court and army (as Parliament gradually stopped voting him supplies), ended not only in its financial ruin but in his ultimate defeat, entailing in turn the loss of their «titles» to land. The inscribed tomb could no longer pay for or vouchsafe one's privileged place in the social hierarchy. At most, it could cry out the scandal of ruthless destruction, as does the 1648 epitaph for the Royalist Katharine Randall, raped and murdered in an attack upon her family's estate during the Civil Wars. Addressing readers of its own «kind,» thus aristocratic, and crying for «blood,» the epitaph nonetheless acknowledges that «bad men» will «think» and do in impunity, and that, in the aftermath of the King's second and final defeat in 1646 and on the eve of his beheading in 1649, it is possible to think that God will not even avenge the innocently slain.

K ind reader judge, here's underlaid
A hopeful, young, and virtuous maid,
T hrown from the top of earthly pleasure
H eadlong, by which she gain'd a treasure
E nvironed with heaven's power,
R ounded with angels for that hour
I n which she fell: God took her home
N ot by just law, but martyrdom.
E ach groan she fetch'd upon her bed
R oared out aloud I'm murdered.
A nd shed this blood, which here doth lie,
N vain for right and vengeance cry?
D o men not think, tho' gone from hence,
A venge God can't his innocence?
L et bad men think, so learn ye good
L ive each that's here doth cry for blood.
(RAVENSHAW, 1878, p. 99)

At the height, in 1647, of egalitarian communist demands for radical economic redistribution and levelling of incomes, if one «expected» one's tomb to be allowed to rest in «eternal ease,» one had to beg God that those «livers» still living would respect the gravestone because marking him who had such largess toward the poor that he never «took fees,» as seen in Edward Lambe's pleading epitaph:

Edward	Edward Lambe	Lambe
Ever	second son of	Lived
Envied	Thomas Lambe	Laudably
Evill	of Trinity	Lord
Endured	Esquire	Lett
Extremities	All his dayes	Like
Even	he lived a Batchelor	Life
Earnestly	well learned in Deveyne	Learne
Expecting	and Common Lawes	Ledede

Eternal	with his councell he	Livers
Ease	helped many, yett took	Lament

fees scarce of any
He dyed the 19th of November 1647
(RAVENSHAW, 1878, p. 98)

Against the irreverence of oncoming – and unpredicatable because only newly literate – masses first glimpsed between 1642 and 1660, who were not to reconstruct themselves after their suppression with the Restoration save gradually as the bourgeois middle class during the eighteenth century, there may have been no other refuge than in the dead language of Latin that went undisturbed because unreadable by the newly literate.

Hic, O, sub Lare parvulo, Couleius *Hic est Conditus, Hic Iacet;* *Defunctus hmani Laboris* *Sorte, supervacuaque vita.* *Non* Indecora pauperie *Nitens,* *Et Non* inerti *nobilis* otio, *Vanóque dilectis popello* *Divitiis* animosus hostis. *Possis ut illium dicere* mortuum; *En Terra iam nunc* Quantula *sufficit?* *Exempta sit Curis,* viator, *Terra sit illa Levis, precare.* *Hic sparge* Flores, *sparge breves* Rosas, *Nam vita gaudet Mortua Floribus* *Herbisque Odorantis Corona* *Vatis adhuc* Cinerem Calentem.	(Here, o traveler, under a small roof, here Cowley is buried, here he lies, finished with the human lot of labor and a superfluous life; splendid in his not unfitting poverty, and noble in his not inactive ease, a fearless enemy to riches loved by the foolish mob. Behold, does not so little land already now suffice him, that you can say that he is dead? Wish, o traveler, that his grave be free from cares and that the earth lie light upon him. Here strew flowers, short-lived roses, for death-in-life enjoys flowers, and crown the still warm ashes of the bard with sweet-smelling herbs).[17]

Diversification of epitaphs in the era of domestic peace

The context and nature of the epitaph changed with the beginning, in 1689, of the period of peaceful political transition. No matter whether one endorses the Whig interpretation of eighteenth century England, or recent challenges to it,[18] after 1689, and until the early 1800's, England was largely characterized by domestic peace in which the epitaph loses its polemical politics, and retreats into what can anachronistically be called an aesthetic and yet also a social position. Aesthetic, indeed, insofar as Alexander Pope, the writer who did the most to elevate the epitaph to literary status, saw in the epitaph a paradigm of the closure requisite of the aesthetic artefact. Concomitant with the

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17 Abraham Cowley, «Epitaphium Vivi Auctoris,» qtd. SCODEL, 1991, p. 216-17.
18 CLARK, 1985, in particular, challenges the interpretation of English history as nearly unequivocally Whig and parliamentary, by mustering evidence for the survival of Royalists well into the nineteenth century. The Whig interpretation was inaugurated especially in Herbert Butterfield's *George III and the Historians*, 1957.

early eighteenth century neo-classical re-definition of the artwork, for which Pope was largely responsible, and which made closure and completion the *sine qua non* of art, the completion and closure to a life represented by the epitaph made of it the perfect microcosm of art.[19] Moreover, in one of his epitaphs upon himself entitled «EPITAPH. *For One who would not be buried in Westminster-Abbey*» from 1738, Pope rejects everything associated with party politics. Such rejection of the political and public role of the poet is also an assertion of a new aesthetic apoliticism, by its contrast with another epitaph from 1721, by the poet Matthew Prior, who contrary to Pope purchased his final resting place in Westminster Abbey:

Pope	Prior
Heroes and Kings! your distance keep:	Nobles, and Heralds by Your leave,
In peace let one poor Poet sleep,	Here lyes what Once was MATTHEW PRIOR,
Who never flatter'd Folks like you:	The Son of Adam and of Eve,
Let Horace blush, and Virgil too.	Can STUART, or NASSAW go higher.[20]

The parallelism of the two epitaphs is striking: the syntagm «Heroes and Kings» re-writes «Nobles, and Heralds»; «Poet» re-writes «MATTHEW PRIOR»; «Horace» and «Virgil» re-write «STUART, or NASSAW»; and «in peace» re-phrases «Here lyes» as does «one» replace «Once.» Such utter parallelism makes glaring the fundamental alteration wrought by Pope. Rather than purport to equal footing with Kings or address with nobility, Pope rejects such public figures (rejecting «*Heroes*» whereas Prior sollicits «*Heralds*»), embarrassing those poets who were the dependent hirelings of political and military leaders.

Pope constructed the social position of the poet through his epitaphs upon the so-called «lowly» members of society: laborers, servants, unfortunate women, neglected poets.[21] When Pope not only wrote the following epitaph on his servant Mary Beach, who had nursed him in his infancy, but had it inscribed on a tablet on the outer wall of his parish church, he performed a radically socially-minded gesture, by his time's standards:

Placed on the outer wall, the tablet clearly situates the special servant: neither in the church with the wealthy and noble, nor in an unmarked churchyard grave. Although Pope does not do away with social distinctions, he made a first step toward considering servants as equal in death, and thus in life.

TO THE MEMORY OF
MARY BEACH
WHO DIED NOV 5. 1725 AGED 78
ALEX. POPE, WHOM SHE NURSED
IN HIS INFANCY AND CONSTANTLY AT-
TENDED FOR THIRTY EIGHT YEARS
IN GRATITUDE TO A FAITHFUL OLD SERVANT,
ERECTED THIS STONE.

Pope thereby inaugurated a new subject matter for the epitaph, changing it from a form of praise of the great to an expression of tenderness and sorrow towards all walks of life. By the end of the eighteenth century, epitaphs on all ranks had become common. What is striking when one scans the numerous anthologies of epitaphs published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see list of works consulted) is first the increasing contiguity, as of the 1730's, of epitaphs on nobility, servants,

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19 See SCODEL, 1991, p. 253n7.
20 Alexander Pope, 1738, *Minor Poems*, p. 376; Matthew Prior, «Epitaph,» 1959, 1:195. Cf. SCODEL, 1991, p. 265-274.
21 See SCODEL, 1991, p. 276.

royalty, labourers, then the frequent side-by-side placement of serious epitaphs on high society with «humourous» epitaphs on drunkards, as well finally as the serious epitaphs on the lowly and mocking epitaphs upon the high ranks. There were two consequences of this acknowledgment of the «lowly.» First, the return of the 1640's specter of egalitarianism in the demands made by servants for better wages and working conditions, exacerbated by the increasing existence of a «middle-class» – spear-headed by merchants in developing capitalism – that created a shortage of servants as well as wage conditions allowing certain servants bourgeois aspirations. The increased anxiety about the leverage of servants can be attested *a contrario* in masters' comparisons of servants with domestic pets. The left-side 1747 epitaph on a pet dog was imitated in the right-side 1780 epitaph on a servant named Cane:

Here lies a pattern for the human race,
A dog that did his work and knew his place:
A trusty servant, to his master dear;
A safe companion and a friend sincere.
In spight of bribes and threats severly just;
He sought no pension, and he broke no trust.
The midnight thief and strolling gypsie found
That faithful *Sancho* watch'd the mansion round:
/.../
Truth warm'd his breast, and love without disguise,
His heart was grateful, and his actions wise.
In him, through life, all social virtues shone;
Blush, foolish man, by brutes to be outdone!
--May no rude hands disturb his peaceful grave,
Who us'd as nature taught, what nature gave;
For nature's gifts to use in nature's way,
Is all the duty beast or man can pay.

«EPITAPH *on an old favourite* DOG,» ll. 1-8; 19-26

Here lies a pattern for the human race,
A Man who did his work, and knew his place:
A trusty servant, to his master dear;
A safe companion and a friend sincere.
In spight of bribes and threats severly just;
He sought no pension, and he broke no trust.

/.../

Truth warm'd his breast, and love without disguise,
His heart was grateful, and his actions wise.
In him, through life, all social virtues shone;
O blush ye great by CANE to be undone!
--May no rude hands disturb his peaceful grave,
Who us'd as nature taught, what nature gave.

Epitaph on Samuel Cane, d. 1782, in *Epitaphia* 45, qtd. SCODEL, 1991, p. 378.

Epitaphs on dogs show masters' wish that servants would be so obedient and inexpensive, during a period of their increasing wage and disobedience, as do *vice versa* epitaphs on servants as if they were canine. The anxiety remained, however, since if «foolish man» (read, «servants») could be «outdone» «by brutes,» the flipside of this is that masters («ye great») are to be «undone» by the servant class.

The second consequence of Pope's acknowledgment of the lowly was that the social greatness of the noble dead was no longer the sole justification of an epitaph. Indeed, the demise of absolute monarchy replaced by limited, non-English monarchs George I, II and III, the gradual slipping stature of royalists, and the inverse relation between diminishing aristocratic wealth and augmenting mer-cantile wealth, were enough to make the inherited claim to social superiority of the nobility no longer simply inherent, or taken for granted. Coupled with the celebration of the socially lower ranks, the epitaph no longer was a simple public statement of the excellence of the upper ranks. Indeed, the shift and eventual disappearance of the epitaph as a culturally-valued genre occurs with the introduction into the epitaph of the form of the elegy. If the epitaph is by definition a «brief definition of the public significance of the dead,» the elegy is centered around the surviving «individual's over-riding sense of loss for another unique and irreplaceable mortal» (SCODEL, 1991, p. 9). Furthering the hybridization of the epitaph and the elegy was the shrinking of the social network by the emergence of individu-alism. As Philippe Ariès suggests, «the relationship between man's atttitude towards death and his awareness of self, of his degree of existence, or simply of his individuality» combined to dictate a

change in the nature of funerary monuments, in particular their inscriptions.[22] Likewise, Clare Gittings has stressed the importance of emergent individualism: «There is, of course, no direct evidence that alterations in funeral practices were seen by contemporaries as being related to a growing sense of individualism [...]. It is, however, a connection which seems to accord with the known facts, rather than to be disproved by them.»[23] Indeed, this individualism, together with the demise of aristocracy mentioned already, produced the recourse to the elegy form and to sentiment:

> During the course of the [early modern England] period a distinct shift in emphasis [in epigraphs and inscriptions] occurred, as a chronological survey of inscriptions shows. In earlier inscriptions, the reader is often most forcefully 'put in mind of human frailty'; 'such as I am so shall you be' is a commonly met sentiment. The comforting of friends, however, occurs more frequently in the memorials of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, rather than the sixteenth century.
> The older, more direct representation of death was ousted by the gentler, more sentimental images. The change in style [...] reflected [...] a desire to swathe the reality of decomposition in a romantic aura, masking and denying the actuality of death. (GITTINGS, 1984, p. 147, p. 149).

If the earlier form focuses on the social worth of the dead, the later form privileges the individual survivor's pain. Early and late eighteenth century epitaphs present this shift clearly:

Elizabeth Carleton, daughter of Edward Carleton,
who was Knight Harbinger to King James II, died
January 19th, 1709, aged 25.
Had heav'n commissioned death to hold his hand,
And virtue could the force of fate withstand,
This beauteous virgin had been longer liv'd,
Nor we so soon of her rich worth depriv'd;
Her charming youth, her meekness, with and sense,
Her charity, her truth, her innocence.
But ripe for God, her soul ascending flew,
And early bid this sinful world adieu.
Reader, make haste her graces to attain,
That thou in bliss may'st ever reign.
(CALDWELL, 1802, p. 221).

Robert West, of St. Martins in the Fields, died
January 13, 1794, aged 51
Dissolv'd in earth, in sad remembrance end
The social ties of husband, father, friend;
Yet these surviv'd, shall truth preserve to fame
The chaste memorial of an honest name;
And to ages bear his worth approv'd,
Who died lamented, as he liv'd belov'd.
(CALDWELL, 1802, p. 223)

Belonging to a family of the last Stuart King who abdicated the throne, abandoning forever absolute monarchy, the Carleton daughter's social worth is first and foremost inherited if tenuously inherent. The epitaph is entirely focused on the values of the dead. In contrast, the epitaph on West, devoid of marks of social stature, tells of the end of the social (»end of / The social ties»). It mentions the body's dissolution, but envelops it rapidly in the memory of the survivor (»remembrance,» «these surviv'd»). The emphasis is not on any qualities of the dead, but entirely on the goodness of the mourners, who not only «lov'd» but rightly «lament» him. The representation of the mourner as of equal if not superior importance to that of the dead may be seen in Thomas Banks' 1795 sculpted monument for the dead Mrs. Margaret Petrie, commissioned by her son (fig. 2): with the son mourning unconsoled alone on the left, whereas the dead mother is safely in the hands of the Christian virtues of Religion, Hope and Faith, the monument interpellates the viewer / reader to sympathize more with the living mourner than with the dead mother.

22 ARIES, 1981, p. 602.
23 GITTINGS, 1984, p. 13.

Monument to Margaret Petrie, by Thomas Banks, 1795. Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Lewisham, London.
Permission granted by National Monuments Record
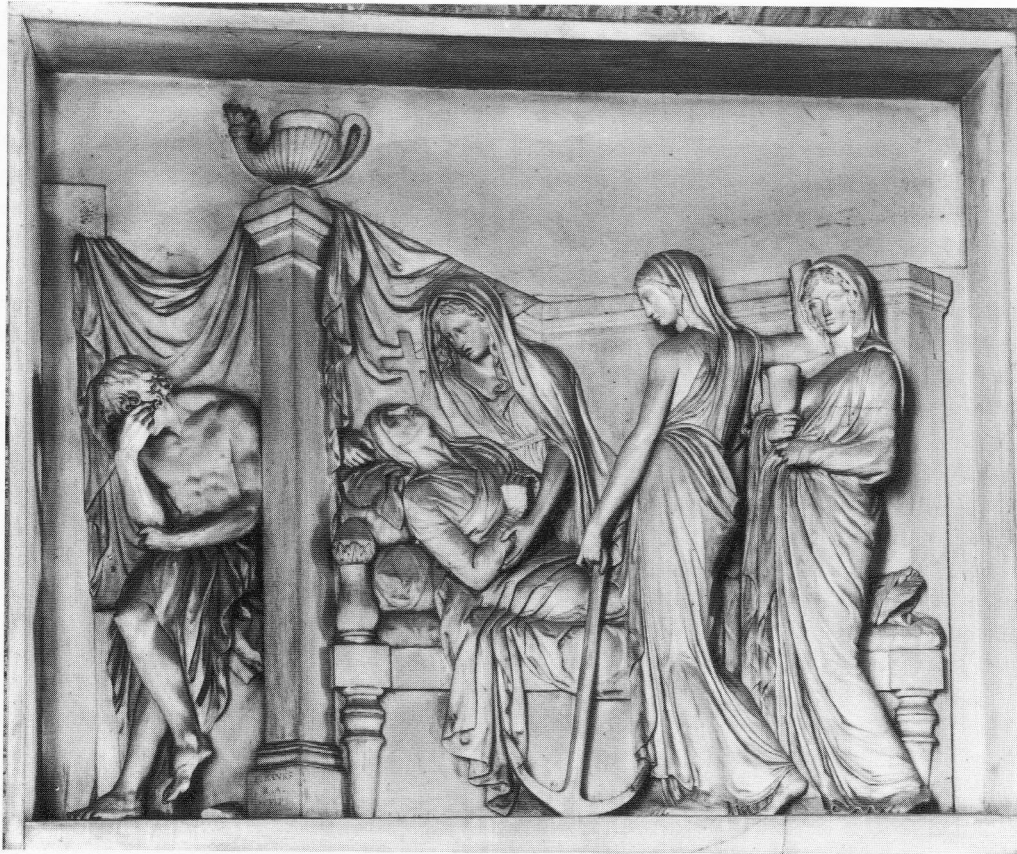
This erosion of the epitaph and incroachment of the elegy is nowhere more evident than in Thomas Gray's «Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.» Maybe the most popular poem in the English language, and certainly one of most important initiations for Gothic, sentimental and Romantic writing of the latter half of eighteenth century England, the one hundred and sixteen line elegy of course famously ends with twelve lines entitled, «The Epitaph,» a chestnut of English literature interpretation. Indeed, the history of the elegy and epitaph are written *in nuce* in the poem. May it suffice to note here that the elegy is entirely devoted to the labourer («plowman,» ll. 3), the uneducated («rude Forefathers,» ll. 16), the working mother («busy housewife,» ll. 22), the nameless dead (of «destiny obscure,» ll. 30), the uncommemorated («no Trophies» «o'er their Tomb,» «the unhonour'd Dead,» ll. 37, 93). Anxious of the utter forgetting of such dead («to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,» ll. 85), the elegy insistently and incessantly calls for acts of memory on behalf of the living reader («Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,» «Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile / The short and simple annals of the poor,» ll. 29, 31-32, etc.), telling the story of an «unlettered» simple poet who took upon himself to be the written memory of such uncommemorated beings. The epitaph that ends the elegy, which tolls the end of the epitaph itself as viable form, is an epitaph on the deceased, simple poet that seeks «a friend,» a reader, who will know how to keep viable the very possibility of memory and mourning:

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Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the lay,
Grav'd on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.

The EPITAPH
Here rests his head upon the lap of earth
A youth to fortune and to fame unknown.
/.../
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a
friend.[24]

The poetic persona telling us, the readers, to «approach and read,» was himself the reader of the «EPITAPH.» One reader telling other readers to read about, i.e., to dwell upon and rightfully mourn, the otherwise forgotten commemorator of the forgotten dead: the excess of anxiety about forgotten or unperformed mourning is only more acute by dint of the fact that the poetic persona must himself presuppose the existence of those who will read his own effort.

At stake in this poem and in many others in its wake is the threat of the disappearance of mourning itself, the threat of the disappearance of the dead not in their physical dissolution but rather into society's obsession with the present and with the living, obsession so great that society taken as the sum total of individuals loses all notion of the past as such.

The disappearing past

It is precisely the uncertainty about such readers – the eighteenth century is the century of the «great jump» upwards in the number of literate members of society[25] – which obsesses epitaphs in the second half of the eighteenth century. In an age where a homogeneously trained and profiled reader was supplanted by a heterogeneity of readers coming from many different strata of society, certain «respectful» or at least programmed and predictable mores vis-à-vis the dead were no longer to be taken for granted, i.e., as inherited. Epitaphs had to tell the reader what s/he would feel. One epitaph from 1777 upon Ann Lingham, dead at 24, commands, «Read this, & cease to drop the silent tear» (RAVENSHAW, 1878, p. 114). «Cease to drop the silent tear» means ‹start to drop a sobbing tear,› i.e., start to manifest signs of mourning, or more simply put, ‹start to mourn now.› A 1796 epitaph on Richard Baxter likewise programs by its end rime the emergent ‹reader› as ‹bleeder›: «All you that please these lines to read, / It will cause a tender heart to bleed» (RAVENSHAW, 1878, p. 115). The epitaph expresses uncertainty about whether people obsessed with the present still know how to mourn or whether they even know that they ought to mourn:

Smitten friends!
Are angels sent on errands full of love:
For us they languish, & for us they die:
And shall they languish, shall they die in vain?
Ungrateful shall we grieve their hon'ring shades,
Which wait the Reformation in our hearts?
Shall we disdain their silent, soft address,
Their posthumous advice, & pious prayer?

Epitaph on Elizabeth Chudleigh, 1800
(RAVENSHAW, 1878, p. 176)

Why start! The case is yours, or will be soon,
Some years perhaps, perhaps another noon;
Life in its utmost span is but a breath,
And those who longest sleep, must wake in death.

Epitaph on Mrs. Charlotte Garbult, 1812
(GRAHAM, 1821, p. 49)

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24 Gray, 1985, p. 33-39.
25 HOLMES, 1993, p. 188-200.

While the Chudleigh epitaph manifests its unease by the multiplication of questions, doubting whether the living have any longer any intuition whatsoever towards the posthumous world, the Garbult epitaph is a sort of *memento mori*, but one which places the emphasis on survivors who do not heed the dead. Uncertainty regarding the behaviour of the unpredictable reader is nowhere more acute than in the frequent use of «If» clauses. In an epitaph beginning, «To the memory of Mrs. Isabelle Browning, who died October 19, 1783, aged 50 years,» the «if» clause expresses a hope that the reader will be capable of the sort of mind-set requisite for mourning: «Reader / If contemplation leads thee in this mournful path, / Thou wilt not refuse a sigh in memory of her / Who was one the loveliest of her sex» (GRAHAM, 1821, p. 57). Joshua Scodel draws attention to numerous «if» clauses, notably Samuel Johnson's use of it in his epitaph on William Hogarth: « If genius warm thee, reader, stay, / If merit touch thee, shed a tear,/ Be vice and dulness far away / Great Hogarth's honour'd dust is here» (p. 334). Doubtful in Johnson's mind is whether the masses who can no longer be denied literacy, and who threaten «polite» society, are capable at all of «genius» or are in any way deserving of proximity with the «great.»

The end of the epitaph as literary genre comes with the juncture of several factors at the advent of the nineteenth century. The epitaph based on the unquestioned public significance of the noble dead gave way to the private elegy, an aesthetic object according to the modern definition of the artistic construct, based on the sensitivity of the survivor. It gave way as well to the newspaper obituary, with the rise of newspapers. Replaced poetically by the elegy destined to be read in a private atmosphere, its public status was supplanted by the prosaic newspaper consumed especially in public spaces such as coffee-houses. Although William Wordsworth did not – save exception – write epitaphs, but rather elegiac poetry, in his *Essay on Epitaphs* he nostalgically, wishfully, calls for the restoration of the value of reading old epitaphs.

> An epitaph is not a proud writing shut up for the studious; it is exposed to all – to the wise and the most ignorant; it is condescending, perspicuous, and lovingly solicits regard; its story and admonitions are brief, that the thoughtless, the busy, and indolent, may not be deterred, nor the impatient tired: the stooping old man cons the engraven record like a second horn-boo; – the child is proud that he can read it; – and the stranger is introduced through its mediation to the company of a friend: it is concerning all, and for all: – in the churchyard it is open to the day; the sun looks down upon the stone, and the rains of heaven beat against it.[26]

The radically egalitarian wish expressed here, «exposed to all,» readable by all members and levels of the community, presupposes full literacy and the universal nature of the epitaph. Nonetheless, Wordsworth practices something else in his «A Poet's Epitaph,» as Scodel argues. Wordsworth testifies to the loss of the community of the living *and* the dead that could be witnessed in seventeenth century epitaph, and to its supplantation by an urban alienated conglomeration of specialists ignorant of each other and of anything outside their domain, in particular the dead.

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26 Wordsworth, 1974, 2:59.

Art a Statesman in the van
Of public business trained and bred?
--First learn to love one living man;
Then may'st thou think upon the dead.

A lawyer art thou?--draw not nigh!
Go, carry to some other place
The hardness of thy coward eye,
The faslehood of thy sallow face.

Art thou a Man of purple cheer?
A rosy Man, right plump to see?
Approach; yet, Doctor, not too near,
This grave no cushion is for thee.

Art thou a man of gallant pride,
A Soldier and no man of chaff?
Welcome!--but lay thy sword aside,
And lean upon the peasant's staff.

Physician art thou?--one, all eyes,
Philosopher!--a fingering slave,
One that would peep and botanize
Upon his mother's grave?

/.../

A Moralist perchance appears;
Led, Heaven knows how! to this poor sod:
And he has neither eyes nor ears;
Himself his world, and his own God;

/.../

Shut close the door; press down the latch;
Sleep in thy intellectual crust;
Nor lose ten tickings of thy watch
Near this unprofitable dust.

But who is He, with modest looks,
And clad in homely russet brown?
He murmurs near the running brooks
A music sweeter than their own.

He is retired as noontide dew,
Or fountain in a noon-day grove;
And you must love him, ere to you
He will seem worthy of your love.

/.../

In common things that round us lie
Some random truths he can impart,--

Wordsworth's epitaph for the sole figure

capable still of reading an epitaph (poets) dis-

misses the possibility for modern society to

aspire to universal values. The dead are no uni-

versal value, which was a presupposition of

early epitaphs. Not only are the dead not

valued, but neither is the act of contemplation,

or of commemoration, of the dead in epitaphs.

The loss of the value of the dead is the loss of a

mode of reading. Indeed, Wordsworth does not

focus the bulk of the poem upon the dead

(there is very little description of the dead).

Rather, attention is upon the inadequate living

readers. Not only noting the disappearance of

the dead from the concerns of the living, his

«A Poet's Epitaph» is also an epitaph for the

poet figure himself, suggesting that the genre

The harvest of a quiet eye
That broods and sleeps on his own heart.

But he is weak; both Man and Boy,
Hath been an idler in the land;
Contented if he might enjoy
The things which others understand.

--Come hither in thy hour of strength;
Come, weak as is a breaking wave!
Here stretch thy body at full length;
Or build thy house upon this grave.

«A Poet's Epitaph»[27]

and its maker had both died. Indeed, they had.

Lyric poetry of nineteenth and twentieth cen-

tury England is overwhelmingly elegiac, not

epitaphic.

The shift from epitaph to elegy registers a change *from* a culture that believes in what survives (for example, spirit, old values, the world as it was, or merely the idea that something does endure) and is scornful towards the living flesh considered as merely ephemeral, *to* a culture that believes only in perpetual change (for example, matter, in the ephemeral, the fleeting, the living), our culture that is scornful towards the dead, towards decay as anything other than ultimate simple disappearance.

Coda

The posthumous «existence» of the epitaph, after its roughly two century literary life in England, surpasses the scope of this essay. We would like to conclude, however, by noting how it sometimes haunts literature in a hidden, ironic way. The 1975 short story, «Redemption,» by the American writer John Gardner, begins by recounting first an accidental fratricide when one Jack Hawthorne crushes to pulp his younger brother David Hawthorne by driving a farm tractor and cultipacker over his brother, and second the devastation the death of the son has upon the father, Dale Hawthorne. What remains of the epitaph is its subversion as cryptic irony. Recounting how the father tried to deal with his unendurable grief by long, late night motorcycle wanderings, the narrator depicts the father «rid[ing] away on his huge, darkly thundering Harley-Davidson 80, trying to forget, morbidly dwelling on what he'd meant to put behind him.»[28] Trying to forget the lost son, yet living in a deadly way upon the son he'd like to have gotten beyond, the father *D*ale *H*awthorne sits his «behind» upon a «*h*uge, *d*arkly *th*undering *H*arley-*D*avidson.» The identical initials of father and son (D. H.) are inverted in the syntagm repeating «h-d, h-d, h-d,» culminating as they do in the epitaphic formula of formulae, «here lies David, son,» that is, «Harley-Davidson.» Hear lies David-the-son, precisely where the father would have the son behind him: under the father's behind that sits on the Harley Davidson. Long after the demise of the epitaph as meritorious literary genre, it remains used in cryptic ways as a means of black humour.

27 Wordsworth, 1940-49, 4:65-67.
28 Gardner, 1985, p. 915.

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