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ARCHAEOLOGIES of ENGLISH RENAISSANCE LITERATURE



PHILIP SCHWYZER

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For my father,
Hubert Schwyzer

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Preface

THIS study would not have been possible without the assistance of a number of generous and open-minded archaeologists. I am deeply grateful to Howard Williams, Carl Knappett, and others at the University of Exeter who responded so generously and productively to my venture across disciplinary divides. I have rarely been so nervous as when standing to address the research seminar of the Department of Archaeology on the subject of our disciplinary intimacy. At an earlier stage, when I was first beginning to explore the world and work of archaeology, I received invaluable guidance from Ruth Tringham, Meg Conkey, David Miles, and Barbara Bender. In the course of this project I have also benefited from the advice of Roberta Gilchrist, Helena Hamerow, and Richard Parker.

On the literary side, I am fortunate in my many splendid colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Exeter; particular thanks are owed to Pascale Aebischer, Karen Edwards, Eddie Jones, Colin McCabe, Nick McDowell, Andrew McRae, Dan North, and Min Wild. I owe enduring debts to Jeffrey Knapp, Jennifer Miller, and Stephen Greenblatt. In response to a string of anxious emails, Graham Parry provided expert advice and information on many points of early modern antiquarianism; I hope he approves of the outcome. Iman Hamam shed light on the matter of mummies, and Grant Voth provided a crucial clarifying perspective on the problem of Shakespeare's tomb.

Much of what follows was first presented to research seminars at Aberdeen, Bristol, Exeter, Oxford, and Sussex; I am grateful to the participants for valuable questions and suggestions which have allowed me to make innumerable local improvements to the argument. At Oxford University Press, my editor Andrew McNeillie has been an exemplary source of support and encouragement. The anonymous readers who evaluated the manuscript offered useful advice which I hope they will find reflected in the pages that follow.

The writing of this book was made possible by a year of research leave, jointly funded by the University of Exeter and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. An abbreviated version of Chapter 3 appeared in *Representations*, 95 (2006). Portions of Chapter 5 have appeared as a chapter in Gerald Maclean (ed.), *Reorienting the Renaissance: Cultural Exchanges with the East* (Palgrave, 2004). I am grateful in both cases for permission to reprint those portions here.

My deepest debt, always, is to Naomi Howell, who read and improved every page of the work in progress and, in the last days of writing, married me.

*I will not speak of the famous beauty of dead women:
I will say the shape of a leaf lay once on your hair.
Till the world ends and the eyes are out and the mouths broken
Look! It is there!*

Archibald Macleish, 'Not Marble Nor the Gilded Monuments'

Textual Note

I HAVE modernized the spelling and punctuation of early modern texts from which I quote, with the exception of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, with its deliberately archaic diction. Quotations from Middle English texts are, where appropriate, accompanied by translations. Except where otherwise noted, all references to Shakespeare's works are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997). All references to Spenser's *Faerie Queene* are to Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1977). All quotations from the Bible are from the King James Version, except where noted.

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Introduction

IN Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the Archbishop of Canterbury proposes a strikingly archaeological metaphor for the relationship between the present and the past. Victory in France, he promises his king, will 'make your chronicle as rich with praise | As is the ooze and bottom of the sea | With sunken wrack and sumless treasures' (1.2.163–5). This, then, is what it means to go down in history. For Canterbury, the past is a matter of depth. More precisely, it is deep matter. The past is literally what lies beneath, embodied in material artefacts bearing witness to bygone triumphs and disasters. But the Archbishop's archaeological metaphor is also an oddly pessimistic one. Like Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history', he seems to perceive history as an unremitting series of shipwrecks, 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage'.¹ The treasures of time may entice the imagination, but scattered on the inaccessible ocean floor, they are of no practical use to anyone. They are akin to the untouchable riches that Clarence in *Richard III* beholds in a dream of drowning: 'Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels . . . Which wooed the slimy bottom of the deep | And mocked the dead bones that lay scattered by' (1.4.27–33). In Shakespeare's plays, the idea of the seabed seems always to be associated with absolute loss and irretrievability.²

Other Elizabethans were more optimistic about the prospects for maritime archaeology. According to the Cornish antiquary Richard Carew, fishermen periodically drew up 'pieces of doors and windows'

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 249.

² Richard III speaks of the past as being 'In the deep bosom of the ocean buried' (1.1.4); Prospero in *The Tempest* abjures magic with the promise that 'deeper than did ever plummet sound, | I'll drown my book' (5.1.55–6). See the discussion of sea-burial in Chapter 4, 121.

from the ooze and bottom off Land's End.³ In plumbing the depths, they were touching the past. Carew was convinced that these household furnishings demonstrated the location of King Arthur's fabled realm of Lyonesse. On land as well, antiquaries were keen to uncover the secrets of time by probing beneath the surface. Near the dawn of the seventeenth century, John Oglander took up barrow-digging on the Isle of Wight 'for my experience', and concluded that 'wheresoever you see a "bury" in any eminent place, most commonly on the top of hills, you may presume that there hath been some buried: according to the etymology of the word—dig, and you shall find their bones.'⁴ When an old man pointed out to him the spot in a cornfield where 'a goodly church' had stood before the dissolution of the monasteries, Oglander dug for that as well. In this case, though the church's downfall was a matter of living memory, his excavations revealed nothing, not even a hint of the foundations. Shakespeare would probably not have been surprised.

This book is a study of the archaeological imagination in the literature of early modern England. It examines how writers in that era responded to the material traces of the recent and distant past: ancient bones and ruined abbeys, exotic mummies and enigmatic urns. This is not primarily a study of antiquarianism, a subject that has been well handled in a number of recent studies.⁵ Nor do I focus on what might be called 'the archaeology of literature' in the truest sense of the term, that is, the history of the book as material artefact. My chief interest lies rather in archaeological themes and motifs as they are manifested in the poetry, drama, and prose of the period. I am also concerned, most explicitly in Chapter 1, with the relationship between archaeology and literary criticism as disciplines devoted to the traces of the dead. The muffled longings and frustrations that are part of the academic air we breathe were well known to writers like William Shakespeare, John Donne,

³ Richard Carew, *The Survey of Cornwall* (1602), 3. See D. R. Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture, 1500–1730* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 25.

⁴ Quoted in Alain Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past: The Origins of Archaeology*, trans. Ian Kinnes and Gillian Varndell (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 142; see Jennifer Wallace, *Digging the Dirt: The Archaeological Imagination* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 133–34.

⁵ Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past*. On the later history of antiquarianism, see Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Hambledon, 2004); Stuart Piggott, *Ancient Britons and the Antiquarian Imagination: Ideas from the Renaissance to the Regency* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989).

and Thomas Browne. Thus I contend that their works are capable of speaking to us, not only about the lost world of the past, but about our own scholarly practice.

The archaeological consciousness which concerns me here is not to be confused with some general 'spirit of the Renaissance'. As I shall show, archaeological ideas and motifs tend to emerge in English literature in relation to specific political, religious, and cultural crises that call into question the relationship between the present and the past. Such crises include colonial warfare in Ireland (considered in Chapter 2), the dissolution of the monasteries (Chapter 3), traumatic shifts in burial practices following the Reformation (Chapter 4), the rise of the market (Chapter 5), and the Civil War and Interregnum (Chapter 6). Probably the most important wellspring for the early modern archaeological imagination was the Protestant Reformation, with its assault on the material basis of Catholic worship. Under Henry VIII and Edward VI, parish churches were stripped of countless objects and ornaments deemed to encourage idolatry and superstition. Yet it is now clear that up and down the country an extraordinary number of these objects, rather than being destroyed or surrendered in accordance with royal command, were carefully hidden away.⁶ Images of saints, rood screens, altarpieces, and holy relics were concealed in the walls or beneath the floors of churches, or carefully buried outside in hopes of better days. The past (and, some hoped, the future) lay just behind the stonework or beneath one's feet. There was thus in a real sense a Catholic underground, composed not of furtive priests and stubborn recusants but of objects awaiting excavation. The Protestant authorities were acutely aware of the problem. At the accession of Mary, and again in the short-lived Northern Rebellion of 1569, many proscribed items were restored to their former places with astonishing speed.⁷ Shakespeare himself may have been a sharer in such archaeological secrets; did he know of the Catholic profession of faith, signed by his father, concealed between the rafters and the tiling of the family's Stratford home?⁸

⁶ Margaret Aston, 'Public Worship and Iconoclasm', in David Gaimster and Roberta Gilchrist (eds.), *The Archaeology of Reformation, 1480–1580* (Leeds: Maney, 2003), 19–21; Sarah Tarlow, 'Reformation and Transformation: What Happened to Catholic Things in a Protestant World?', *ibid.* 108–21.

⁷ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 583–4.

⁸ James G. McManaway, 'John Shakespeare's "Spiritual Testament"', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 18 (1967), 197–205.

To an extent that I did not anticipate when I began my research, this book has turned out to hinge on a peculiar archaeological fantasy, or nightmare. This is the recurring vision of the perfectly preserved body or artefact that, touched by the living, dissolves suddenly to dust. As Shakespeare's many sombre visions of sea-burial suggest, the Renaissance fascination with the persistence of material artefacts across time was matched and perhaps exceeded by a fascination with examples of impermanence, loss, and dissolution. In the chapters that follow, the disintegration motif will be found to recur in a remarkable range of late medieval and early modern texts. Chapter 2, on the alliterative poem *St Erkenwald* and Spenser's Irish writings, deals with ancient British and Irish bodies which crumble or disappear in spectacular fashion, leaving the soil free for English plantation. Chapter 3, which analyses ambiguous representations of monastic ruins in Elizabethan poetry, also involves a kind of vanishing, as one apparently stable image of the past melts suddenly into its opposite. The next two chapters focus on anxieties about corporeal disintegration, first in Shakespeare and Donne's persistent fantasies of exhumation and dispersal, and then in the strange seventeenth-century preoccupation with the use of powdered Egyptian mummies as a pharmaceutical. Finally, I turn to Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia*, in which the crumbling body or artefact testifies to the impossibility of communicating with the dead. The book concludes with a brief survey of this durable image, from the Bible and classical myth to contemporary fiction and film.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND LITERARY CRITICISM

The border station between the disciplinary realms of archaeology and literary criticism is, or was until very recently, an exceedingly sleepy place. In times past there had been something approaching a war between the two domains—but that was centuries ago, and since then they seemed not so much to have made peace as to have forgotten about one another's existence. Legitimate migrants offering their passports at the border were few and far between. There were, to be sure, rumours of smuggling in both directions, but even these were exaggerated. Commodities touted as imports from the other side often turned out, on closer inspection, to be of domestic manufacture. There were some, indeed, who questioned whether the two territories had a common border at all. Were they not rather both isolated peninsulas of the continent of History?

Recently, this once neglected boundary has become the site of unwonted activity, with a small spate of innovative studies testifying to the possibility of contact between the disciplines. Among these, John Hines's *Voices in the Past: English Literature and Archaeology* (2004) is the most ambitiously interdisciplinary in its approach. One of very few individuals to boast professional experience in both disciplines, Hines argues that 'there is a close and deep affinity between material artefacts and literature as products of human cultural activity [and] an equally close affinity between the scholarly disciplines dedicated to the study of this pair of fields'.⁹ Combining interpretation of texts from the Old English *Guthlac A* and *B* to Dickens's *Bleak House* with analysis of material culture across more than a millennium of English history, Hines's goal is 'a comprehensive cultural history of a hitherto undeveloped kind'.¹⁰ The conjunction of archaeology and literary studies provides the key to a more holistic vision of the past. By contrast, the stakes in Jennifer Wallace's *Digging the Dirt: The Archaeological Imagination* (2004) are more clearly ethical than epistemological. A literary scholar specializing in the Romantic period, Wallace turns to the history and theoretical discourse of archaeology to develop an 'archaeological poetics, a sensitivity to the ground's elegiac capacity for recording and memorializing vanished histories and personal loss'.¹¹ My own approach falls somewhere between these two models, perhaps being weighted more towards Wallace's melancholy metaphors than Hines's densely material world, whilst focusing on a more specific time period and body of texts than does either. In this respect, the present book is more directly comparable to Christine Finn's exemplary recent study of archaeology in the poetry of W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney.¹²

Given their different objects of study, the absence of a more developed interdisciplinary tradition uniting archaeology and literary criticism is not surprising. Yet there has always been a buried affinity between the two fields, even if in earlier ages it most often found expression in antagonistic terms. The modern discipline of archaeology has its origins

⁹ John Hines, *Voices in the Past: English Literature and Archaeology* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 26.

¹⁰ Ibid. 35

¹¹ Wallace, *Digging the Dirt*, 30.

¹² Christine Finn, *Past Poetic: Archaeology in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney* (London: Duckworth, 2004). See also Christine Finn and Martin Henig (eds.), *Outside Archaeology: Material Culture and Poetic Imagination* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2001).

in a revolt against the overweening authority attributed by Renaissance scholars to classical texts. 'I have more faith in medals, tablets and stones, than in anything set down by writers', snapped Antonio Agostino in the sixteenth century.¹³ (The fact that the objects Agostino placed his faith in were themselves inscribed indicates how slow and difficult was the separation of the disciplines.) Many archaeologists working today would undoubtedly agree with Agostino. Some would go on to observe that archaeology is more democratic than textual history; whereas texts perpetuate the biases of an elite minority, the material traces studied by archaeology can reveal the realities of life as experienced by the mass of the population.¹⁴ The majority of literary scholars today would be quick to agree that the traces they study are biased in their account of historical realities, but this does not undermine the critics' certainty that nothing lasts—or speaks—like literature. Shakespeare's personal vaunt is also the charter of the profession: 'not marble nor the gilded monuments of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme' (sonnet 55; see Chapter 3). That monuments are mutable and mute is a founding assumption of literary scholarship, just as the absence or inadequacy of texts is a starting-point for archaeology.

Although literary criticism and archaeology have rarely been joined in constructive dialogue, the two disciplines have a long history of speaking in the voice of other. Indeed, nothing is more common in each field than to invoke the other as a metaphor for its own practice. In criticism, the archaeological metaphor is present (if often unnoticed) in many of the words we use to describe the acts of reading and interpretation. We *dig down* through textual *levels* or *layers* to *excavate* the *subtext* or *unearth* hidden meanings. These are all examples of *buried metaphors* (and so, of course, is that). In 'Against Interpretation', Susan Sontag neatly skewered this archaeological vocabulary and the presuppositions about the relationship of critic to text that lie behind it: 'The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs "behind" the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one.'¹⁵

The ubiquity of this excavatory lexicon in literary studies owes little if anything to direct contact with archaeology, and much more to the archaeological metaphors employed by a number of leading thinkers

¹³ Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past*, 128

¹⁴ This controversial view is discussed and problematized in John Moreland, *Archaeology and Text* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994), 6.

of the twentieth century. Foremost among these is Sigmund Freud, whose lifelong passion for antiquities, and keen admiration of Heinrich Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy, are well known. Freud invoked archaeology as a figure for psychoanalytic exploration in his early paper 'The Aetiology of Hysteria':

Imagine that an explorer arrives in a little-known region where his interest is aroused by an expanse of ruins, with remains of walls, fragments of columns, and tablets with half-effaced and unreadable inscriptions. He may content himself with inspecting what lies exposed to view, with questioning the inhabitants—perhaps semi-barbaric people—who live in the vicinity, about what tradition tells them of the history and meaning of these archaeological remains . . . [or] he may start upon the ruins, clear away the rubbish, and, beginning from the visible remains, uncover what is buried. If his work is crowned with success, the discoveries are self-explanatory . . . Saxa loquuntur [stones talk]¹⁶

Here, as in a number of passages composed throughout his career, Freud's investment in the imagined archaeological scene far exceeds the needs of the metaphor. Although he would go on to question the validity of the spatial-archaeological metaphor when applied to mental landscapes, and ultimately to suggest that psychoanalysis was superior to archaeology, the language of excavation and reconstruction remained integral to his project.¹⁷ The subsequent influence on the vocabulary of literary criticism can be felt, not only in overtly psychoanalytic approaches to literature, but in any approach that purports to reveal hidden structures that lie beneath the surface of the text. A second great wellspring of archaeological metaphors in literary studies has been the early work of Michel Foucault. Whereas for Freudians archaeology is a matter of digging down and dredging up, Foucauldian archaeology centres on stratigraphy (the study of strata or layers). This is an archaeology that has paradoxically renounced depth, eschewing historical narrative to focus on discontinuous layers of discourse.¹⁸ Freud and

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'The Aetiology of Hysteria', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, iii. ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1962), 192.

¹⁷ On the archaeological metaphor in Freud's body of work, see Cathy Gere, 'Inscribing Nature: Archaeological Metaphors and the Foundation of New Sciences', *Public Archaeology*, 2 (2002), 195–208; Sandra Bowdler, 'Freud and Archaeology', *Anthropological Forum*, 7 (1996), 419–38; Sabine Hake, 'Saxa Loquuntur: Freud's Archaeology of the Text', *boundary 2*, 20 (1993), 146–73.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1972); Dieter Freundlieb, 'Foucault and the Study of Literature', *Poetics*

Foucault understand archaeology in fundamentally dissimilar ways. The contemporary consequence is that radically different literary-critical methodologies can be conceived of by their practitioners as equally 'archaeological'.

Archaeologists themselves are often ambivalent about the prevalence of archaeological metaphors in other fields. Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson find it on the whole rather dispiriting:

Many great continental thinkers of the twentieth century—Freud, Benjamin, Lacan, Foucault—have appropriated archaeology in some form. However the archaeology referred to by these writers consists of little more than shallow metaphors—the idea that archaeologists work with silent traces and fragments or the idea that the past is concealed and that we have to dig deep down, one layer at a time, to get to it—for which no archaeologists would take credit. We cannot claim that the actual work of archaeology has made an impact on the conceptual repertoire of any of the theorists listed above.¹⁹

One might reply that to provide another discipline with its fundamental conceptual vocabulary, its basic terms of reference, is nothing to sneeze at. Indeed, the dismissive reference to 'shallow metaphors' is indicative of how deeply archaeological terms of reference, such as surface vs. depth, are embedded in the language we use to talk about language. Key terms such as depth, excavation, discovery, and stratigraphy are for that matter profoundly significant metaphors within the professional discourse of archaeology itself, as well as being the stuff of archaeological practice.²⁰

Perhaps the most pertinent response to Hodder and Hutson's remark about the metaphorical appropriation of one discipline by another would be to point to the title of the text in which it occurs: *Reading the Past*. References to reading and textual interpretation permeate contemporary archaeological discourse as thoroughly as archaeological terminology pervades the language of criticism. These terms have been part of the everyday language of archaeology for a very long time, though theorists have become more conscious of them in recent years as part of archaeology's linguistic turn. Christopher Tilley has played a leading

Today, 16 (1995), 301–44; Jeffrey Schnapp, Michael Shanks, and Matthew Tiew, 'Archaeology, Modernism, Modernity', *Modernism/Modernity*, 11 (2004), 9.

¹⁹ Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 211.

²⁰ Cornelius Holtorf, *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2005), 16–38; Michael Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1992).

role in foregrounding and theorizing the idea of reading—and related concepts such as text, metaphor, and sign—in relation to archaeological practice.²¹ Others are more wary of the language analogy, arguing that material signs—though no less accessible to reading—function in a very different way from linguistic ones.²² For a literary scholar, it is an enlightening experience to converse with archaeologists who cheerfully deny that terms like ‘reading’ and ‘text’ need have anything at all to do with words and books.

The ease with which archaeology and literary studies can be enlisted as metaphors for one another is a measure of their comparability but also of their difference. They are, at least as traditionally conceived, parallel rather than overlapping disciplines, directing sometimes similar questions to fundamentally distinct objects. Their relationship is rooted in a tacit division of labour, with archaeology applying itself to the material remains of the past, whilst criticism deals with the immaterial. Fifty years ago, Mortimer Wheeler, a pioneering excavator and also a lover of the poets, gestured ruefully to what appeared to him the insuperable gulf between the two modes of inquiry: ‘The archaeologist . . . may answer Browning’s question, “What porridge had John Keats?” without a passing recognition of the author of *Endymion*.’²³ In Wheeler’s view, while archaeology and literary criticism may both be capable of producing knowledge about Keats, neither can supply information that is of any service to the other.

One measure of the profound transformations that have taken place relatively recently in the field of literary studies is that Browning’s derisive question would probably not strike contemporary Keatsians as lying beyond the pale of critical enquiry, or even as particularly absurd.²⁴ By the same token, some contemporary archaeologists might

²¹ Christopher Tilley, *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1991); and Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

²² Ian Hodder, ‘This is Not an Article About Material Culture as Text’, *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 8 (1989), 250–69; Maurice Bloch, ‘Questions Not to Ask of Malagasy Carvings’, in Ian Hodder, Michael Shanks, Alexander Alexandri, Victor Buchli, John Carman, Jonathan Last, and Gavin Lucas (eds.), *Interpreting Archaeology: Finding Meaning in the Past* (London: Routledge, 1995), 212–15; Carl Knappett, *Thinking Through Material Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

²³ Mortimer Wheeler, *Archaeology from the Earth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 214.

²⁴ I am unaware if the question of Keats’s porridge has ever been resolved. Edmund Spenser’s diet is no longer a mystery, however, thanks to the analysis of organic remains preserved in the ruins of Kilcolman Castle. Eric Klingelhofer, ‘Edmund Spenser at

well argue that not only Keats's diet but his literary productions could be 'read' as aspects of material culture. It has become almost a matter of conventional wisdom in both disciplines that the porridge must be somewhere in the poem (well-digested, of course), and the poem in the porridge—in theory, anyway. Locating them, of course, is quite a different matter. For the many researchers in both fields who are at present grappling with such questions, the urgent need for genuinely interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration should be clear. This book is intended as a contribution to that emergent dialogue. In the final part of this introduction, I would like to look further into the question of how literary texts and archaeological objects might be imagined as interpenetrating, or embedded within, one another.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND LITERATURE

As an example of how texts may become inextricably bound up with the matter of archaeology, let us take the case of White Horse Hill in Oxfordshire. Etched into the hillside, the chalk figure known as the White Horse of Uffington has long been a source of irresistible fascination for archaeologists and literary authors alike. Over the last three centuries, it has been seen as a memorial of St George's victory over the dragon, as a tribute to the Saxon King Alfred's defeat of the Danes, as an ancient Celtic equine goddess, and finally as a Bronze Age monument more ancient than any of these. It has been the subject of a Victorian novel by Thomas Hughes and a long poem by G. K. Chesterton, as well as receiving evocative mention in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. As I have discussed elsewhere, literary narratives have had a profound influence on how the White Horse has been perceived by local people and by archaeologists, shaping the kind of questions that are asked about it and hence, to some extent, determining the answers.²⁵ Yet the involvement of texts in the history of this site goes (literally) deeper than that.

In 1993, archaeologists excavating a round Bronze Age barrow on White Horse Hill discovered a buried book. Twenty-three centimetres

Kilcolman Castle: The Archaeological Evidence', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 39 (2005), 133–54.

²⁵ Philip Schwyzer, 'The Scouring of the White Horse: Archaeology, Identity, and "Heritage"', *Representations*, 65 (1999), 42–62.

below the surface, embedded in a mixture of chalk and loam, was a well-preserved buckram bound second edition of Sir Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1831). The inside front cover was inscribed with a pentacle and the words '*Demon de Uffing*' in antique lettering, daubed over with red paint which was doubtless intended to resemble blood.²⁶ The book had clearly been in the earth for a significant period of time. It was difficult to judge whether it had been deposited in the 1850s, when the barrow had been excavated by a local landowner, or more recently by New Age or spiritualist enthusiasts. In reporting the discovery, the archaeologists noted the book's obvious occult interest, but did not speculate further on why this volume in particular had been chosen for what seems to have been a ritual interment.

The key to the mystery is almost certainly to be found in Scott's third letter, which features its own remarkable tale of barrow-digging. As an illustration of pagan superstitions, Scott recounts the story of two Norse brothers-in-arms, Asmund and Assueit, who rather recklessly swear to be buried together, regardless of which of them dies first. Thus, following Assueit's death, the living Asmund descends with him into the burial mound and permits himself to be entombed alive, 'without a word or look which testified his unwillingness to fulfil his fearful engagement'.²⁷ Some hundred years later, the sepulchre is encountered by a Swedish war-party, who decide to break into it, 'partly because . . . it was reckoned a heroic action to brave the anger of departed heroes by violating their tombs; partly to attain the arms and swords of proof with which the deceased had done their great actions.'²⁸ Instead of treasure, the excavators discover the still-living Asmund, drenched in gore from his long battle with the predatory ghoul of Assueit, who had arisen as soon as the chamber was sealed over and endeavoured to devour him. In Scott's account, Asmund boasts of his hard-won victory over this vampiric opponent, and then falls dead himself. The burial of the *Letters on Demonology* in the soil of an ancient barrow can be read as both a reference to and a re-enactment of this bizarre tale. If the gory 'Demon

²⁶ David Miles and Simon Palmer, 'White Horse Hill', *Current Archaeology*, 142 (1995), 376; David Miles, Simon Palmer, Gary Lock, Chris Gosden, and Anne Marie Cromarty, *Uffington White Horse and its Landscape: Investigations at White Horse Hill Uffington, 1989–95, and Tower Hill Ashbury, 1993–4* (Oxford: Oxford Archaeology, 2004), 52 (contribution by Alan Hardy).

²⁷ Sir Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*, 3rd edn. (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1887), 91.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 91.

de Uffing' suggests a local equivalent of the 'evil demon who tenanted [Assueit's] body', the part of Asmund is performed by the book itself, emerging triumphant before the astonished excavators at the end of its long subterranean ordeal.²⁹

Scott identifies the source of this 'wild fiction' as Saxo Grammaticus, the twelfth-century Danish historian. Saxo's story of Asmund and Asvith has the same general outline, but its tone of earthy realism contrasts markedly with Scott's eldritch fantasticality. In Saxo's account, Asmund's interment has lasted only a few days, not a hundred years, before treasure-seekers break open the mound. On his release from confinement he recites a series of verses to the terrified onlookers, with the refrain, 'Why are you dismayed to see me so bereft of colour? How can any man who lives with dead men not grow somewhat faded there?'³⁰ This is still a tale of the supernatural, but its central concern is with the practical challenges and dangers involved in negotiating the barrier between the living and the dead. The opening of ancient and recent burial mounds in search of concealed riches was by no means an uncommon activity in twelfth-century Scandinavia. Only three or four decades before Saxo wrote, a group of Norwegians had broken into Maes Howe on Orkney; they claimed in the runes they left on the walls to have carried away great treasure, but, according to *Orkneyinga Saga*, two of them left their minds behind in the tomb.³¹ That Saxo had some first-hand knowledge of barrow-digging is suggested by the telling detail that the subterranean chamber turns out to be much deeper than the excavators had anticipated, requiring them to lower a man down in a basket. Behind this might lie the experience of treasure-seekers who thought they were opening a Viking barrow, but had happened instead on a Neolithic tomb. The story of Asmund and Asvith, which would itself end up buried in a barrow, is based to some extent on real archaeological awareness and experience.

Is it a coincidence that Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* is also the earliest known source for the story of Amleth, or Hamlet? Saxo's history of the Danish prince who avenges his father by killing his usurping uncle already contains most of the elements of the plot made famous by Shakespeare, with the notable exception of the Ghost, whose

²⁹ Sir Walter Scott, 92.

³⁰ Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes, i. The English Text*, trans. Peter Fisher, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1979), 151.

³¹ *Orkneyinga Saga*, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin, 1978), 188.

source scholars have been compelled to seek elsewhere.³² Yet, as we have seen, there are undead beings elsewhere in Saxo's book, and the tale of Asmund and Asvith was certainly known to the Elizabethans. Thomas Nashe retold the macabre history of 'Asuitus and Asmundus' in *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Divell* (1592), drawing special attention to the creepy corporeality of the Scandinavian revenant. 'Have spirits their visible bodies . . . that may be touched, wounded, or pierced? Believe me, I never heard that in my life before this.'³³ It is a striking fact that like Asvith/Asuitus, the Ghost in *Hamlet* is no airy spectre but a palpably physical entity. Hamlet refers to it as a 'dead corpse' (1.4.33) and wonders how it came to be cast forth from its sepulchre. (These lines are discussed further in Chapter 4.) There is thus some likelihood, as Cay Dollerup has suggested, that Shakespeare derived part of his conception of the Ghost from Saxo's barrow story, or from Nashe's retelling of that ghoulish tale.³⁴

Hamlet is a play about the force of the undead, and also about the excavation of graves. The scene in which the prince banters with the Gravedigger and seizes on the skull of the jester Yorick casts its shadow over all subsequent archaeology. To dig up the bones of the dead, to lift skulls from the earth, is always on some level to refer to *Hamlet*. So at least it seemed to the Victorian pioneers of modern mortuary excavation. One archaeological enthusiast, the Reverend Charles Woolls, made the link explicit in *The Barrow Diggers: A Dialogue in Imitation of the Grave Diggers in Hamlet*.³⁵ Uncovering an Anglo-Saxon cemetery on Salisbury plain in the 1850s, John Akerman invoked *Hamlet* as a source

³² See Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

³³ Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse his Supplication to the Divell*, in *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. R. B. McKerrow, revised by F. P. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), i. 233.

³⁴ See Cay Dollerup, *Denmark, Hamlet, and Shakespeare: A Study of Englishmen's Knowledge of Denmark Towards the End of the Sixteenth Century with Special Reference to Hamlet* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1975), 33–41. Whilst Dollerup focuses on parallels between Saxo's original story and Shakespeare's play, those that link *Hamlet* to Nashe's retelling are also worth noting. In Nashe's version, the friends have been interred 'not full two months', a phrase close to that which Hamlet will repeat obsessively: 'But two months dead—nay not so much, not two' (1.2.138). Nashe has the tomb opened by mattock-wielding 'pioneers'; Hamlet will call the Ghost working in the earth a 'worthy pioneer' (2.1.165); Asmundus's face is 'imbrued with congeald blood', resembling the effects of the poison which did 'posset | And curd, like eager droppings into milk, | The thin and wholesome blood' (1.5.68–70) of Hamlet's father.

³⁵ See Wallace, *Digging the Dirt*, 144–5.

of information on old Germanic burial practices.³⁶ Hamlet's by-play with Yorick may also have been somewhere in the mind of Martin Atkins when he dug the barrows on White Horse Hill in the same decade, lifting out dozens of ancient skulls whilst leaving the headless skeletons to be discovered by future archaeologists.³⁷ The copy of *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* may have gone into the round barrow at the same time that the skulls came out.

Scott's story and Atkins's excavation both have a 'source' in the writings of Saxo Grammaticus, which in turn must have been based in part on still earlier barrow excavations. The burial of the book can thus be seen as the crystallization of centuries of negotiation and exchange between archaeology and literary narrative. Long before the book was deposited in the loam, be it in the 1850s or the 1970s, the text was already embedded in the barrow, and the barrow in the text. In digging up the book, modern archaeologists were unwittingly participating in yet another retelling of Saxo's story. Should we see the excavation of the buckram-bound volume as a liberation of the textual spirit, escaping the deathly grip of gross archaeological matter? Or was it rather an archaeological apotheosis, the revelation of the book as pure artefact? Who is Asmund in this scenario, and who is Asvith?

The buried book may serve as an emblem, not only for this peculiar history of influence and exchange, but for other cases in which literary narratives and archaeological artefacts have become intertwined. Another of Scott's stories, *The Pirate* (1824), became embedded in the standing stones of Stenness on Orkney a century ago, when archaeologists raised a dolmen-style 'altar' in the centre of the monument to conform to a description in the novel. 'Mr. James Cursiter of the Ministry of Works detailed how and why the work was undertaken on a sheet of paper, which was placed in a bottle, and deposited in cement in the socket of the largest monolith of the circle.'³⁸ The altar was pulled down in 1972,

³⁶ John Yonge Akerman, 'An Account of Excavations in an Anglo-Saxon Burial-Ground at Harnham Hill near Salisbury', *Archaeologia*, 35 (1853), 265. I am grateful to Howard Williams for this reference. It is perhaps more than a coincidence that a fellow founder of Anglo-Saxon funerary archaeology, J. M. Kemble, was a member of the great dynasty of Shakespearean actors (son of Charles, brother of Fanny), and himself an inspector of plays.

³⁷ Miles and Palmer, 'White Horse Hill', 375.

³⁸ Angela McClanahan, *The Heart of Neolithic Orkney in its Contemporary Contexts: A Case Study in Heritage Management and Community Values* (Historic Scotland/World Heritage Sites Publications, 2004) (www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/the_heart_of_neolithic_orkney_in_its_contemporary_contexts.pdf).

reputedly by a disgruntled Orcadian farmer, but Cursiter's message in a bottle remains part of the site, and will probably do so as long as the stones stand. Nor is Scott the only author to 'become archaeology' in this sense. Contemplating, in a treatise on certain ancient urns, the indignities attending inhumation, Sir Thomas Browne complained that 'To be knav'd out of our graves, to have our skulls made drinking-bowls . . . are tragical abominations'.³⁹ In 1840 Browne's skull was indeed knaved out of its resting place in St Peter Mancroft, Norwich, going on to spark intense scrutiny and debate among phrenologists; later still, it would become the elusive goal of an ironic quest by the post-modern antiquary W. G. Sebald.⁴⁰ These are the sort of resonant instances that first drew me to the boundaries of archaeology and English literature.

As I propose in the first chapter, archaeology and literary studies are united by their shared intimacy with the traces of past life, and by a common if covert desire for contact with the departed makers of these traces. We are, in this sense, a whole class of earnest Asmunds, willingly taking up residence in the dwelling-places of the dead. At first glance, the tale of Asmund and Asvith might not seem to offer a particularly comforting or optimistic vision of our professional practice. Most of us are not disposed to imagine the dead makers we study as predatory ghouls, intent on swallowing us whole. (Nor would most scholars appreciate the suggestion, however merited in some cases, that they themselves 'grow somewhat faded' from keeping company with the dead.) Yet from a methodological perspective, at least, there is something valuable about the vigour, the tenacity of grip and ferocity of desire, which the story imputes to the dead Asvith. In this respect, the indefatigable ghoul contrasts markedly with the motif the reader will encounter many times in this book, that of the beautiful dead body that disintegrates at the slightest touch. As I will suggest in conclusion, the latter image seems to sum up a pessimism about the possibility of recovering meaning from the past that is unfortunately widespread in scholarship today. There is undoubtedly something seductive in the idea that the truth of the past is forever lost, and that our own efforts to

³⁹ Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, or Urne-Buriall*, in *The Works of Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), i. 155; see Chapter 6 n. 10.

⁴⁰ Howard Marchitello, *Narrative and Meaning in Early Modern England: Browne's Skull and Other Histories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 135–73; W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Harvill, 1998), 9–26.

recover it only set it further beyond reach. Yet the resulting blend of self-recrimination and narcissism is intellectually as well as morally dubious. We are better off imagining the past as Asvith than as Eurydice. Better a past that grips us with force, that we must exert ourselves against, than one which dissolves on contact, leaving us with no greater task than to weave consoling fictions of our own.

1

Intimate Disciplines Archaeology, Literary Criticism, and the Traces of the Dead

WHEN asked about what I teach and study, I find myself naming things that do not exist. Early modern England. The age of Elizabeth. Edmund Spenser. William Shakespeare. To say that these do not exist is not to assert that they are fictions, but simply to acknowledge that they are gone. The Virgin Queen and her courtier poets, the brilliant playwright and his flourishing company, have vanished and have no being in this world. The culture that gave rise to them, the structures that sustained them, are gone. It has all turned out very much as Shakespeare's Prospero predicted in *The Tempest*:

The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind.

(4.1.152–6)

Well, almost like that. The difference is that though the great Globe Theatre and its chief playwright have indeed dissolved, together with so much else, they have managed to leave a rack or two behind. A 'rack' in early modern English is a wisp of cloud or smoke; here the sense of the homonym 'wrack', wreckage, is also appropriate. Trails of vapour bearing witness to something that passed by, fragments salvaged from the wreck of time: these in fact are what I teach and study. *The Tempest* itself is an example. Not 'Shakespeare' and 'Tudor England' but texts, traces of a lost world.

My academic field, literary studies, is not alone in studying and cherishing such racks of time. As the archaeologists Michael Shanks

and Christopher Tilley observe in a mildly ironic charter for their own discipline:

A need has been perceived for a special field of activity, for a class of experts or professionals, to deal with the problem the traces of the past pose to the present. The basic problems are:

- (1) how to observe the traces of the past objectively;
- (2) how to bridge the distance between the traces in the present and their social origin in the past;
- (3) what to do about the destruction and disappearance of the traces of the past;
- (4) why these problems are worth posing and considering anyway.¹

The ‘traces of the past’ that archaeologists deal with are, by definition, material: axe heads and ash deposits, beakers and bones. Yet the four-point list could serve equally well as a charter for literary studies, where the traces are by definition textual. Archaeologists and literary scholars are akin in devoting their professional lives to traces of the worlds we have lost, and the problems that at once complicate and motivate their work are strikingly similar. ‘Objectivity’ may have become something of a straw-man in both fields, but the other questions remain very much alive. How can we relate the traces of the past to their original context? How can we keep what has survived from disappearing (culturally and/or physically)? How are we to justify our enduring fascination with these enigmatic traces to the wider public, and indeed to ourselves?

Between them, archaeology and textual studies draw to their analytical embrace the bulk of the surviving traces of the human past. Of course, they do not have a monopoly on these traces. Historians, for instance, routinely draw on a wide range of texts and artefacts in order to gain information about past people, classes, and societies. For the historian, these textual and material records have the status of evidence; they are keys—often the only keys—to unlocking the past.² What distinguishes both archaeology

¹ Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 8.

² The great medievalist Johan Huizinga described the ‘historical sensation’ as a kind of ecstatic communion with the past, catalysed by a trace. ‘This contact with the past, which is accompanied by the absolute conviction of complete authenticity and truth, can be sparked off by a line from a chronicle, by an engraving, a few sounds from an old song. It is not something that the author, writing in the past, deliberately put down in his work. It is “behind” and not so much “inside” the book that the past has sent down to us.’ (Quoted in Jurgen Pieters, *Speaking with the Dead: Explorations in Literature and*

and literary studies from history is their peculiar, even eccentric fixation on the traces in themselves. The 'need' that drives these disciplines is not to know the past, but something more specific and apparently technical: 'to deal with the problem the traces of the past pose to the present.' As modes of enquiry, they have their origin in—and are bound to remain responsible to—the puzzling fragments and vestiges that form their distinctive objects of study. Although archaeologists and literary critics may share the historian's desire to understand past societies or mentalités, such understanding is not their final goal, but rather a means (and never the only one) of coping with demands that emanate from the traces themselves.

To speak of 'traces of the past' risks being both vague and euphemistic. For what makes these traces distinctive, and what makes them capable of issuing demands that whole disciplines must arise to meet, is that they are traces of a *human* past. They are, in other words, traces of the dead. Archaeology and literary studies share an unparalleled and unsettling intimacy with the vestiges and leavings of past life—with the words the dead wrote, sang, or heard, with the objects they made, held, or lived within. Every text that has come down to us from earlier times is a message from the dead, every archaeological trace a testament to past life, regardless of whether they were produced with posterity in mind or even with a conscious intention. Our objects of study have been bequeathed to us by dead people, and in handling them—literally or figuratively—we can and do imagine that we are experiencing contact with their departed makers.³ Both archaeology and literary studies have from their inception as disciplines been understood by some of their most thoughtful practitioners as forms of necromancy.

History (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 59–60.) Of course, the study of history has undergone profound changes in recent years, and few scholars would now hope, through the interrogation of traces, to arrive at an objective understanding of the past 'as it really was'. None the less, the idea of the trace as gateway to a lost realm (but no more than a gateway) remains fundamental to Huizinga's discipline.

³ It might be objected that many literary critics and, to a lesser degree, archaeologists concern themselves with the traces of the living, rather than the dead. Yet, as Eliot observed, the distinction is more apparent than real: 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.' T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1934), 15. By the same token, in archaeology, the study of contemporary refuse (garbology) is a thriving subfield, but the purpose of the exercise is to derive rules about the relationship between culture and material waste which can be applied to the study of the past. See William L. Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (Tucson, Ariz.: University of Arizona Press, 2001).

Digging for the dead, as Mortimer Wheeler never tired of insisting, is the very essence of archaeology and its *raison d'être*.

[T]he archaeological excavator is not digging up *things*, he is digging up *people*; however much he may analyse and tabulate and dessicate his discoveries in the laboratory, the ultimate appeal across the ages, whether the time interval be 500 or 500,000 years, is from mind to intelligent mind, from man to sentient man. Our graphs and schedules mean nothing if they do not ultimately mean that. Of our scraps and pieces we may say, with Mark Antony in the market-place, 'You are not wood, you are not stones, but men.'⁴

The role of the archaeologist, Wheeler would go on to say, was not simply to turn over dead matter, thereby 'adding dust to dust and ashes to ashes'. Rather, archaeological insight relies on a mixture of poetry and necromancy: 'the archaeologist must have a spark of the intuitive comprehension which inspires the painter or the poet . . . They make the past *live* because they are themselves alive and can reintegrate their reasoned facts with the illogicalities of life.'⁵

Wheeler's trope of archaeological investigation as a resurrection of the dead has a long pedigree, reaching back to the earliest origins of the modern discipline. Cyriac of Ancona, sometimes described as the first archaeologist, criss-crossed Greece and Asia Minor in the fifteenth century recording monuments and inscriptions. When asked why he took such pains, he is said to have replied, 'to wake the dead'.⁶ In the seventeenth century, Meric Casaubon explained the marvellous power of material traces to bring the past to life:

Antiquaries are so taken with the sight of old things . . . because those visible superviving evidence of antiquities represent unto their minds former times, with as strong an impression, as if they were actually present, and in sight as it were: even as old men look gladly upon those things, that they were wont to see, or have been otherwise used unto in their younger years, as enjoying those years again in some sort, in those visible and palpable remembrances.⁷

Casaubon's antiquary stands with one foot in the grave, the other in the fountain of youth. A century later, Thomas Pownell of the Society

⁴ Mortimer Wheeler, *Archaeology from the Earth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 2–3.

⁵ *ibid.* 202.

⁶ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of Italy in the Renaissance: An Essay*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Phaidon, 1945), 111. On Cyriac of Ancona, see Roberto Weiss, *The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).

⁷ Meric Casaubon, *A Treatise of Use and Custom* (London, 1638), 97–8.

of Antiquaries testified still more explicitly to the necromantic potency of the material trace when he advocated barrow-digging as a means of 'recovering from the oblivion of the grave something at least . . . which might become a leading mark to the reviviscence of those times'.⁸

A reader sceptical about the possibility of such 'reviviscence' might point to the latent irony involved in Wheeler's quotation from 'Antony in the market-place' in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Mark Antony's exhortation, 'You are not wood, you are not stones but men' (3.2.139), is addressed to the Roman mob which he is endeavouring to stir into frenzy against the murderers of Caesar. This is the same dull-witted and fickle crowd that has been addressed—with some justice—in an earlier scene as 'you blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!' (1.1.34). Antony's rabble-rousing is thus at once necromantic and ventriloquistic, putting life into the limbs and words into the mouths of senseless things, much as he wishes to 'put a tongue | In every wound of Caesar that should move | The stones of Rome' (3.2.219–21). There is always the danger that the archaeologist's 'spark of intuitive comprehension' may in fact be the equivalent of Antony's rhetoric. 'Reviviscence', raising the dead, is not a difficult trick if the dead are only puppets, and we are holding the strings.

Conscious of the power of interpretation and the inevitability of bias, archaeologists today tend to be sharply sceptical about the possibility of real contact with the past. Archaeologists 'do not study the past, they create it', Lewis Binford has argued. 'What they study is the archaeological record.'⁹ Matthew Johnson is more sympathetic to the 'appeal . . . of mystery and romance, of the past calling to us through its remains', yet he feels obliged to warn impressionable readers that these voices are really inside our own heads: 'Artefacts cannot tell us anything about the past because the past does not exist. We cannot touch the past, see it or feel it. *Our beloved artefacts actually belong to the present.*'¹⁰ In short, the necromantic longings that draw people to archaeology in the first place are hopeless, unfulfillable, founded on false premisses. None the less, these desires remain in a significant sense the cornerstone of the discipline.

Similar (and no less impossible) desires pervade the field of literary studies. If the archaeologist originates as a type of necromancer, the

⁸ Pownell's 1770 address to the Society of Antiquaries is quoted in Jennifer Wallace, *Digging the Dirt: The Archaeological Imagination* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 13.

⁹ Lewis Binford, *Debating Archaeology* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1989), 51.

¹⁰ Matthew Johnson, *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 12.

textual scholar seems to be a species of medium or clairvoyant. As Stephen Greenblatt famously confesses in the opening sentence of *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 'I began with the desire to speak with the dead'. Greenblatt identifies this desire as 'a familiar, if unvoiced, motive in literary studies, a motive organized, professionalized, buried beneath thick layers of bureaucratic decorum: literature professors are salaried, middle-class shamans.'¹¹ The longing to converse with the dead has probably never been absent from the study of literature. In an interesting recent survey, Jurgen Pieters traces the theme of reading as dialogue with the dead from the early Renaissance to the present.¹² Petrarch, a foundational figure for both literary and archaeological studies, wrote of the dead of the classical past arising to counsel and jest with him. In a famous letter, Machiavelli described how in the evening 'I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on that food that alone is mine and that I was born for. There I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason of their actions; and they in their humanity reply to me.'¹³ The seventeenth-century poet Constantijn Huygens described old authors as 'dead ones who are still here' and, mindful of the material basis of such survival, praised paper for preserving them. 'Thanks are due to the good people who first produced it and who made the ink, the leaves and the pens that enable mortality to survive and give us a foretaste of what it is to be immortal.'¹⁴ (An archaeologist would be quick to note Huygens's telling textual bias—the makers of paper and ink deserve praise, but it is the author who achieves immortality thanks to their creations.)

For Petrarch, Machiavelli, and Huygens alike, the voices of the dead correspond in an unproblematic way with the words on the page. In our reading is their speaking. Thus, when Petrarch wept over his copy of Homer, saying 'O great man how willingly would I listen to you!' the problem was not that he did not believe the dead could speak; it was simply that he had not mastered Greek.¹⁵ Yet in Greenblatt's reformulation of the well-worn theme, we find that this easy

¹¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 1.

¹² Pieters, *Speaking with the Dead*.

¹³ Machiavelli's letter to Francesco Vettori is quoted *ibid.* 21.

¹⁴ Quoted *ibid.* 57.

¹⁵ Francesco Petrarch, Letter to Nicholas Sygeros (*Rerum Familiarum*, XVIII. 2), in *Letters on Familiar Matters/Rerum Familiarum libri XVII–XXIV*, trans. and ed. Aldo S. Bernardo (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 46.

correspondence has evaporated. The modern scholar is quite capable of reading the words of the dead, yet he is beset with doubts as to the possibility of genuine communication. 'I never believed that the dead could speak to me, and . . . I came to understand that in my most intense moments of straining to listen all I could hear was my own voice.'¹⁶ The literary scholar's anxious awareness that he is hearing only his own voice parallels Matthew Johnson's gloomy recognition that artefacts belong to the present. In place of the old certainty that the traces of the past provided real access to the dead and their world, contemporary scholarship has come to see such communication as fraught with snares and pitfalls, if indeed it is possible at all.

Two major developments in modern intellectual history are evidently responsible for this drastic decline in confidence. The first is that we no longer consider it safe to assume that the dead were 'people like us' in a way that would permit their meanings to be easily understood. The past is a foreign country: the mental world of a Walter Raleigh, let alone that of the ancients, now seems dauntingly difficult to reconstruct. A second stumbling block is that it has become much harder for many people to suppose that the dead actually exist, at least as anything other than the mental constructs of the living. Scholars like Petrarch and Huygens may have avowed that the dead lived on in their writings, but they also trusted that the dead had a real existence somewhere else, even if their condition was temporarily beyond the reach of human knowledge. Reading and archaeological were thus means of rehearsing for a conversation which would actually take place at the end of time. For those who suspect that the dead are simply not there, the idea of conversing with or awakening them even in a metaphorical sense becomes far more problematic.

Yet far from abandoning the old trope as an embarrassment, literary and archaeological theorists have continued to revisit and revise it with subtlety and determination. As Greenblatt concludes in his meditation on speaking with the dead,

It was true that I could hear only my own voice, but my own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living. Many of the traces have little resonance, though every one, even the most trivial or tedious, contains some fragment of lost life; others seem uncannily full of the will to be heard.¹⁷

¹⁶ Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 1.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

The recognition that there is no one out there to speak to makes the scholar's relationship with the trace more, not less, vital, more, not less, charged with the urgency of impossible longing. The dead are no longer conceived of as being somewhere *behind* the traces, but as being somewhere *inside* them—and hence, to whatever extent the traces live on in contemporary culture, somewhere inside us. In a curious way, Greenblatt's formulation of the trope makes the dead seem more powerful and more inescapable than ever; rather than passively awaiting reviviscence, they reach out eagerly to possess the voices of the living.

This is not to suggest that all or most contemporary literary critics and archaeologists would be comfortable identifying themselves as 'salaried, middle-class shamans'. If, as I have argued, a longing for contact with the dead lies at the heart of both disciplines, then it must be admitted that both have spent much of their modern histories shunning the implications of this desire, this identity. The progress of literary and archaeological theory, especially over the past half century, can be interpreted in hindsight as a series of attempted exorcisms, efforts to establish the foundations of the disciplines on some more wholesome ground. In both fields, the theoretical pendulum has swung tellingly between a narrow fascination with texts or artefacts 'in themselves' and historicist or anthropological approaches that threaten to leave the individual trace—sometimes literally—in the dust.

One obvious means of removing the dead from the academic equation is to fetishize the trace, focusing on the text or artefact so intently and exclusively that the past is effectively crowded out of the picture. In literary studies this tendency is associated particularly with the New Criticism and allied formalisms which dominated the field in the 1950s and for some time after. For critics in this tradition the literary text was an autonomous and autotelic artefact, existing for itself and explicable in terms of its own inner logic. Authorial intention and historical context were twin irrelevancies; there was no ghost in, let alone behind, the textual machine. To the New Critics, archaeology offered a compelling metaphor for the kind of close artefactual analysis they championed; hence the title of Cleanth Brooks's classic statement of formalist principles, *The Well-Wrought Urn*.¹⁸ Although there is no comparable tradition of radical formalism in archaeology, the actual practice of many archaeologists working in the middle of the last century displayed

¹⁸ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1947).

a similar tendency to fetishize the trace. Focusing on the description and dating of artefacts, archaeologists tended to dismiss questions of cultural context and meaning as beyond their remit, belonging to the realm of the irrecoverable. Thus Gustav Hallström, to take one example, having devoted a long and arduous career to discovering, documenting, and categorizing rock carvings in northern Scandinavia, was not dismayed to announce that he had drawn no conclusions about their origins or significance. For Christopher Tilley, Hallström embodies 'the tragedy of much contemporary archaeology—painstaking, almost masochistic effort, an immense labour, but . . . an evasion of the responsibility to make sense of the past'.¹⁹

If fetishism of the trace offers one means of evading an uncomfortable intimacy with the dead, another means is to move the focus of scholarship as quickly and as far from the individual trace as possible, usually in the direction of social history. This was the uncompromising programme of the 'New Archaeology' (also known as 'processual archaeology') which became prominent in the 1960s and 1970s. As one early theorist of the movement insisted, in an implicit retort to Wheeler's dictum that the business of archaeology was digging up people, 'the process archaeologist is not ultimately concerned with "the Indian behind the artifact" but rather with the system behind both the Indian and the artifact'.²⁰ The goal was to reconstruct past social systems and chart their development across time according to demonstrable laws of societal evolution. The material trace had the status of evidence, and was accordingly valued to the extent that it was typical or indicative (for example, of a type of productive economy, or trade network, or craft specialization). New Archaeologists could be overtly hostile to the notion that traces might have their own intrinsic value.²¹ Probably the closest equivalent in literary studies would be the study of literary 'systems' as propounded by Franco Moretti. Moretti's project for the systemic analysis of world literature has a seductive

¹⁹ Christopher Tilley, *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 15. Hallström's *Monumental Art of Northern Sweden from the Stone Age* appeared in 1960.

²⁰ Kent Flannery, 'Culture History vs. Culture Process: A Debate in American Archaeology', *Scientific American*, 217: 2 (Aug. 1967), 120. See also Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

²¹ In a revealing anecdote, Lewis R. Binford, a founder of the New Archaeology, recalled watching a like-minded colleague grind beneath his heel a 'unique' (and hence evidentially insignificant) sherd. *An Archaeological Perspective* (New York: Seminar Press, 1972), 130–1.

grandeur, somewhat diminished by the fact that it does not involve—indeed, actively proscribes—the reading of books.²² A comparable impulse to vault beyond the trace is also evident in some, though not all, contemporary species of ‘historicism’ as practised by literary critics.

For some time, it has been a frequently expressed view in both fields that the way forward must lie in some reintegration or synthesis of the two extremes outlined above.²³ Many of us would like to recover the respect for particularity and responsiveness to detail exemplified in formalist criticism and descriptive archaeology, without sacrificing the wider horizons and theoretical toughness supplied by historicism and processualism. The quest today is for a workable and hopefully dynamic balance: between text and context, artefact and origin, between the individual trace and the lost world of which it is a survivor. A desire for balance sounds uncontroversial and perhaps blandly pious, yet such syntheses have been and remain surprisingly difficult to achieve and sustain. Finding the balance in our scholarship would mean, in the first place, respecting the intrinsic duality of the traces we study. It would mean treating them neither as fetishes nor as launch pads, but as entities with a dual nature, as things in the present and witnesses to the past, belonging in different ways to us and to the dead. The dialogue we have so long dreamt of will emerge, if it emerges at all, on terms of reciprocity rather than subordination.

In a meditation on the archaeological artefact, Michael Shanks speaks of objects brought out of the earth as having undergone a ‘sea-change’.²⁴ The reference is to Ariel’s song in *The Tempest*, describing the metamorphosis of the drowned Alonso’s body on the seabed.

²² Moretti imagines a treatise on world literature ‘*without a single direct textual reading . . . the ambition is now directly proportional to the distance from the text . . .*’ Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review*, 2nd series, 1 (Jan./Feb. 2000), 57.

²³ Such a balance was implicit in the early New Historicism, with its call for attention to both ‘the historicity of texts and the textuality of histories’, though it has not always been maintained; see Louis Adrian Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 5. Richard Strier calls for the reintegration of formalist and historicist approaches in *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and the Renaissance Text* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). In archaeology, the urge for reintegration can be detected in some strains of post-processualism (which, like the New Historicism, took shape in the 1980s), and in the emerging ‘symmetrical archaeology’. See Timothy Webmoor and Christopher Witmore, *Symmetrical Archaeology*, Metamedia, Stanford University (<http://traumwerk.stanford.edu:3455/Symmetry/home>).

²⁴ Michael Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1992), 109.

Full fathom five thy father lies.
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange.

(1.2.400–6)

The ostensible theme of Ariel's song is the absoluteness of loss, the impossibility of contact with someone who is not only dead, not only drowned in the deep, but transformed beyond recognition. At the same time, the song serves to awaken a powerful yet confused longing, a desire that is at once for precious substances, pearls and coral, and for the dead person behind them. Ariel begins by stressing the irreversibility of the movement from past to present—'Of his bones are coral made'—yet the succeeding line reverses that movement, at least syntactically, creating a sense that the present may be falling back into the past. 'Those are pearls that were his eyes.' The verbal progression from pearls to eyes runs confusingly counter to the chronological progression from eyes to pearls. The absolute barrier between now and then, between the transmuted trace and the lost reality, wavers for a moment as if it too were underwater. The eery equilibrium of these lines might serve as a model for the elusive balance archaeologists and literary critics must ideally bring to their work with the traces of the past. Without this balance, the possibilities for scholarship are drearily familiar. On the one hand, naïve and ahistorical admiration for the lustre of the pearls; on the other, the smug observation that what look so shiny from a distance are really a dead man's eyeballs. We have surely had enough of both.

ON THE FRONTIERS OF DESIRE: HEARING OBJECTS, TOUCHING TEXTS

So far, I have argued that archaeology and literary studies share a definitive concern with and responsibility to the traces of the dead. Literary scholars read messages from the dead in textual form, whilst archaeologists handle their physical artefacts and remains. Between the two fields, there would appear to be a clear and satisfying division of labour, with room for occasional collaboration over, for instance, the

history of the book, or the archaeology of Elizabethan theatres.²⁵ But the demarcation of the disciplines is not quite so clear-cut. At the heart of each discipline, it would appear, lies a buried longing for the object of the other. Literary scholars have long dreamt of 'touching' their intangible texts. Pacing among their silent sherds and samples, archaeologists strain to hear voices. It is in this intersection of impossible desires that literary studies and archaeology may find themselves able to address one another.

Texts are not physical objects. Dependent though they may be on some material medium—a printed book, an actor's voice, a computer screen—to reach an audience, texts themselves cannot be weighed in the scales or cradled to the breast. None the less, or indeed for this very reason, notions of materiality and tactility are deeply embedded in the desires we bring to our reading, and the language we use to describe it. 'Touching', is what texts do to us when they elicit an unhesitant emotional response. 'Touching' is also, according to some critics, what we do to texts, especially when we are reading them honestly and well. The Victorian Matthew Arnold advised readers to memorize short passages of transcendent poetry by the likes of Homer and Dante: 'if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality.'²⁶ The touchstone—literally, a tablet used for testing the purity of precious metals—is a strikingly concrete figure for the application of critical judgement. The supreme quality in Arnold's reader is 'tact', meaning not the possession of good manners but a 'touch' or 'feel' for literary quality. 'Tact' has recently been revived as a critical term by Valentine Cunningham, who champions an ethics of reading-as-touching in opposition to the bloodless abstractions of literary theory.²⁷ More searchingly, Daniel Tiffany has introduced the paradoxical notion of 'lyric substance' as a means of interrogating our presuppositions about both aesthetics and materiality.²⁸

²⁵ 'Book history' is a thriving subfield within literary studies, but appears so far to have remained largely aloof from archaeology. There has been real contact between the disciplines in the area of theatre history. See e.g. Jon Greenfield and Andrew Gurr, 'The Rose Theatre, London: The State of Knowledge and What We Still Need to Know', *Antiquity*, 78 (2004), 330–40.

²⁶ Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry', in *The Complete Prose Works*, ix. *English Literature and Irish Politics*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), 168.

²⁷ Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 140–64.

²⁸ Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Beyond the dream of speaking with the dead lies the still more impossible fantasy (or, in some cases, nightmare) of joining hands with them in real, grasping contact. In John Keats's poem 'This Living Hand' it is the dead author who proffers his hand in a gesture that is at once repellent and compelling.

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd. See, here it is—
I hold it towards you.²⁹

It is fitting that the poem should survive as a manuscript in Keat's 'hand' (printed only many years after his death), and fitting also that it is a fragment, the enigmatic trace of an unknown intention. Keats may have intended these lines for a Websterian tragedy, or as a rebuke to the woman he loved, Fanny Brawne. Yet it is impossible to read the poem without imagining—without knowing in one's gut—that the 'you' of the final line refers to the reader. Keats proffers his dead hand to us. The temporality of the poem is complex and recursive in ways that recall Ariel's song. As Katherine Rowe observes, 'just at the moment that the poem returns to the present tense, from the description of an apparently imminent future, the hand so threateningly offered appears to be returning from the past, as if its imaginary transfusion and revivification had already taken place'.³⁰ The moment of 'earnest grasping' takes place in a time that is at once then and now, his and ours.

Not only dead hands but also inanimate objects exert a powerful fascination in contemporary literary studies. As readers, we seem to have fallen in love with things, and beneath the umbrella of 'Thing Theory' huddle a range of new materialisms.³¹ Scholars focusing on early modern England have begun to think afresh about the extraordinary

²⁹ John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970), 701.

³⁰ Katherine Rowe, *Dead Hands: Fictions of Agency, Renaissance to Modern* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 115. See also John Kerrigan, 'Touching and Being Touched' (Review of Cunningham, *Reading After Theory*), *London Review of Books*, 24: 18 (19 Sept. 2002).

³¹ See Bill Brown (ed.), *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

vitality and significance invested by that culture in certain things and materials—from the eucharistic host to yellow starch, looking glasses, and tobacco. The influential collection *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (1996) has given impetus to a new mode of textual scholarship which purports to differ from earlier versions of historical materialism in that it is not ‘embarrassed before actual objects’.³² As Douglas Bruster has observed, ‘In place of class struggle, hegemony, or ideology, the new materialism attends to objects in the world: clothing, crockery, sugar.’³³ Sceptics, detecting in this movement a retreat from a political engagement with material culture into a kind of scholarly cabinet of curiosities, have dubbed it ‘the new antiquarianism’.³⁴

Some of those who find fault with the new materialism in literary studies do not object to its basic programme but complain rather that it has not yet gone far enough. Thus, Bruster urges greater attention to the materialist strain already present in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thought. Jonathan Gil Harris suggests that ‘the “new antiquarianism” . . . needs to become, if anything, *more* antiquarian’, by attending not only to origins, but to the ‘trajectories of things through time and space’.³⁵ Maybe the real point is that the new materialism/antiquarianism needs to become, if anything, more *archaeological*. Although the critics involved in these debates rarely make direct reference to archaeological theory, they often appear to be rehearsing topics and themes that have been current in archaeology for more than twenty years. Both the exhortation to attend to historical versions of materialism (the way past cultures thought about things) and the growing interest in the object’s trajectory (or ‘life-history’) are central strands of ‘post-processual’ archaeology.³⁶ We may yet come to speak of the beginning of the new century as marking the dawn of literary criticism’s ‘archaeological turn’. (Sadly, even should this come to pass, ‘the new

³² Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7.

³³ Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture: Early Modern Literature and the Cultural Turn* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 192.

³⁴ Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare’s Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 24; Jonathan Gil Harris, ‘Shakespeare’s Hair: Staging the Object of Material Culture’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 52 (2001), 479–91.

³⁵ Harris, ‘Shakespeare’s Hair’, 480.

³⁶ Both approaches are exemplified in Barbara Bender, *Stonehenge: Making Space* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), which also includes an account of the rise of post-processualism. On how archaeologists have attended to objects’ ‘life-histories’, see Cornelius Holtorf, *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2005), 78–91.

antiquarianism' is unlikely to catch on as a name for the emerging movement.)

If literary critics look to objects and to 'touch' as defining something essential to their discipline, even as they appear to lie beyond its bounds, a similar role is played in archaeology by 'voice'. 'Voices' are, of course, what the objects of archaeology lack by definition. You can no more hear a potsherd than you can touch *King Lear*. The unbreakable silence of the artefact is a well-worn theme. Contemplating a set of Anglo-Saxon funerary urns, Thomas Browne (to be revisited in Chapter 6) declared 'these are sad and sepulchral Pitchers, which have no joyful voices; silently expressing old mortality, the ruins of forgotten times, and can only speak with life, how long in this corruptible frame, some parts may be uncorrupted.'³⁷ Voice is again what John Keats finds lacking above all in his 'Grecian Urn', though, having a keener appetite for experiences of baffled longing, he is enchanted rather than disappointed by its silence: 'Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, | Thou foster-child of silence and slow time . . . Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought | As doth eternity.'³⁸ The conventional stance adopted by archaeologists towards their mute artefacts partakes of Browne's pessimism and Keats's ecstasy in roughly equal measure. Shanks and Tilley draw a satirical portrait of the traditional archaeologist 'devoted to the embalmed relics deafeningly silent yet sacred in their meaninglessness'.³⁹ With a lighter touch, Matthew Johnson reports that 'I have stood in the middle of countless castles and ancient palaces and listened very carefully, and not heard a single syllable. Colleagues tell me that they have had similarly distressing experiences with pottery, bones, bags of seeds.'⁴⁰ Though archaeologists may from time to time use the phrase 'let the pots speak' (especially when calling for a return to a more artefact-centred, less theory-laden research model), it is axiomatic that the pots cannot and will not do any such thing.⁴¹

Yet voices from the lost past are to be heard in contemporary archaeology. Literary critics might begin with the desire to speak with the dead, but some archaeologists have gone a step further, actually attempting by various means to make the voices of the dead audible. In

³⁷ Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, or Urne-Buriall*, in *The Works of Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), i. 131.

³⁸ Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in *The Poems of John Keats*, lines 1–2, 44–5.

³⁹ Shanks and Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology*, 7.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *Archaeological Theory*, 12.

⁴¹ Hodder and Hutson, *Reading the Past*, 16.

collaboration with theatre practitioners, they have explored the acoustics of prehistoric chamber tombs, hoping to catch in their own voices the echo of more ancient utterances: 'in these spaces I can imagine that had I screamed in terror, chanted in reverence, talked to myself, sung in the darkness, whispered to my fellow initiates, as I am doing now, then it would have been just so.'⁴² Others, blending fact with fiction, give voice to the dead in monologues or vignettes, appended to or interwoven with more traditional site analysis. From the charred Neolithic huts of Opovo, which appear to have been burnt down intentionally at the end of their use-life, Ruth Tringham reconstructs the experience of a young widow, blissfully cremating her former home. 'Mustn't let the fire die, or he'll come back . . . Burn his pots! Kill his stuff! Now I'm in charge. The circle is complete.'⁴³ Experiments of this kind are particularly prominent in feminist archaeology, concerned with countering the erasure of female experience from archaeological narratives. Not surprisingly, the dead speakers imagined by archaeologists tend to possess a deep sensitivity to material culture, often combined with a sense of foreboding about the future. 'My sleep is troubled. In my dream, the houses are gone, we are not here, no one knows our names. Will there be anyone to hold this obsidian flake that I use to carve this small figure of my long-dead sister?'⁴⁴

The dead women and men to whom archaeologists 'give voice' in passages like those cited above are typically members of non-literate cultures or social groups which have bequeathed us no written record of their beliefs, customs, or attitudes. One might conclude that these ventriloquized voices are simply a poor and wistful substitute for the rich communicativeness of text. As the judicious antiquary Thomas Hearne observed in the eighteenth century, 'conjectures may be allow'd . . . where there is no inscription to direct, and a greater liberty of fancy is allowable in such cases than where we have plain

⁴² Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 130.

⁴³ Ruth Tringham, 'Households with Faces: The Challenge of Gender in Prehistoric Architectural Remains', in Joan M. Gero and Margaret W. Conkey (eds.), *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 124. For comparable exercises see Janet W. Spector, 'What this Awl Means: Toward a Feminist Archaeology', in the same volume, 388–406; Mark Edmonds, *Ancestral Geographies of the Neolithic: Landscapes, Monuments and Memory* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁴⁴ Rosemary A. Joyce, *The Languages of Archaeology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 150; for discussion of the ways in which archaeological writers give voice to the dead, see also 64–6, 124–6.

history to guide us'.⁴⁵ Hearne's generosity on this point does not conceal his basic certainty that texts are inherently superior to artefacts in communicating information about the past. Even today there persists a widespread assumption that, in the words of Moses Finley, 'the potential contribution of archaeology to history is, in a rough way, inversely proportional to the quantity and quality of the available written sources'.⁴⁶ In blunt terms, nothing speaks like words. Why listen to the pots when you can listen to the poets?

Approaching archaeological discourse from the vantage point of a literary critic, I confess to having begun with the assumption that the fascination with 'voice' developed out of a need to compensate for the silence of the sherds—that it was, in effect, the academic equivalent of Freudian 'penis-envy', a longing for what one lacks by definition and can never be complete without. I have since become healthily aware that in contemporary archaeological discourse, 'voice' means something (indeed, several things) very different from 'what poets have and pots don't'. Voice may, for instance, be understood as the capacity to bear witness to real historical conditions. Judged by this standard, artefacts arguably possess clearer and more reliable voices than do the majority of texts. Whereas texts from most historical periods are primarily reflective of the ideals, fantasies and perceptions of a relatively small dominant class, archaeological fieldwork can often shed light on daily life as it was actually lived by all sectors of society. Some historical archaeologists see it as their disciplinary mission to give 'voice to the otherwise voiceless'.⁴⁷ Why listen to the lies of elite poets when you can get the lowdown (in every sense) from the pots?

One crucial distinction between the voices of artefacts and those of texts (or, indeed, of living speakers) is that archaeological voices are not held to belong to or inhere within the objects themselves. Rather, the artefact becomes eloquent through its association with other objects, the

⁴⁵ Quoted in Joseph M. Levine, *Dr. Woodward's Shield: History, Science and Satire in Augustan England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 228.

⁴⁶ Moses Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History* (London: Penguin, 1990), 93. See the discussions in Anders Andrén, *Between Artifacts and Texts: Historical Archaeology in Global Perspective* (New York: Plenum, 1998); John Moreland, *Archaeology and Text* (London: Duckworth, 2001). Even internet search engines appear to share this prejudice. When instructed to search for the phrase, 'let the pots speak', Google (www.google.com) responds, 'Did you mean "let the poets speak"?' (accessed 2 Mar. 2006).

⁴⁷ Charles Orser, *A Historical Archaeology of the Modern World* (New York: Plenum, 1996), 179. This view of historical archaeology is hotly contested in Moreland, *Archaeology and Text*.

material context in which it is embedded. In the words of Ian Hodder and Scott Hudson, 'It is often claimed that material objects are mute, that they do not speak, so how can one understand them? [But] as soon as the context of an object is known it is no longer totally mute.'⁴⁸ In the same spirit, Elizabeth Stone, lamenting the looting of archaeological objects in post-invasion Iraq, declares 'each object ripped from its connection with its makers and users, loses its voice and becomes mute, a mere pretty thing'.⁴⁹ What speaks is not the autonomous artefact, but the trace in intimate and complex relation to its origin. What archaeologists call 'voice' bears an intriguing resemblance to what New Historicist literary critics have sometimes described as 'resonance'.⁵⁰ The idea of voice as the precipitate of a relationship across time is one I will return to in conclusion.

The two disciplines meet at the crossroads of impossible desires. The parallel interests of archaeologists in voice and of literary critics in materiality offer an opportunity for stimulating contact, and a likely basis for future collaboration. I am, as should be apparent, both intrigued and optimistic about the possibilities for interdisciplinary dialogue and exchange. Yet, even at this early stage, it seems appropriate to sound a note of caution. The goal of our collaboration need not and should not be an omniscient cultural history, equally at home and adept with texts and things, voice and substance.⁵¹ In the long run, this might prove to be only the latest means of evading the intimacy with the traces of the dead that defines our modes of scholarship. Our current fascinations with talking pots and tangible texts are perhaps most significant as half-conscious acknowledgements of the fantastic, quixotic desire at the

⁴⁸ Hodder and Hutson, *Reading the Past*, 4–5.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Wallace, *Digging the Dirt*, 23.

⁵⁰ 'By resonance I mean the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which as metaphor or more simply as metonymy it may be taken by the viewer to stand.' Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and Wonder', in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 170. It is significant that Greenblatt finds the clearest examples of resonance in material artefacts, such as Cardinal Wolsey's hat.

⁵¹ Although possibly going farther than I would in calling for a 'comprehensive cultural history' based on the marriage of archaeological and critical insights, John Hines also stresses that the two disciplines must maintain their distinct integrity, founded in their different objects of study. John Hines, *Voices in the Past: English Literature and Archaeology* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 35.

heart of both disciplines: the desire for real contact with the dead. The final goal of 'reviviscence' is, of course, no closer or farther away than it has ever been. In the meantime we are left with our fragments and traces, with the responsibilities they impose upon us, and the desires we bring to them.

2

Exhumation and Ethnic Conflict Colonial Archaeology from *St Erkenwald* to Spenser in Ireland

IN the summer of 1996, a human skeleton was recovered from the banks of the Columbia river in Kennewick, Washington. At first, the bones were judged to be those of an early European settler, on the basis of height and the elongated, 'Caucasoid' cranium. Yet a stone spear point embedded in the pelvic bone was of a type used thousands of years in the past. The results of carbon dating indicated that the skeleton was more than nine thousand years old. Word quickly spread that a 'white man' had walked in ancient Washington—a claim that was taken in some quarters to suggest that Native Americans might not be the real 'natives' after all. The request of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation that the bones be relinquished to them for reburial was resisted by a team of archaeologists who argued that the skeleton should be retained for further study. The long legal conflict that ensued was, for all concerned, about much more than the fate of Kennewick Man. It was, in the words of one of the archaeologists involved, 'a battle over who controls America's past'.¹

The Kennewick case revived a legacy of bitterness and antagonism between indigenous tribes and the American archaeological establishment regarding the right to dispose of Native American remains. The conflict had appeared to be settled in 1990 with the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which grants tribal communities control over the remains of their dead. But the

¹ Robson Bonnicksen, quoted in Laurajane Smith, *Archaeological Theory and the Politics of Cultural Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2004), 164. Smith gives a detailed account of the case up to 2002, 161–73. For more recent developments and a general history, see the 'Kennewick Man Virtual Interpretive Centre', *Tri-City Herald* (<http://www.kennewick-man.com>).

question of who should dispose of the body of Kennewick Man rested on the problem of his 'cultural affiliation'. In claiming cultural affiliation with the individual they referred to as 'Ancient One', the Umatilla relied principally on oral traditions, which taught that they were an autochthonous people, 'part of this land since the beginning of time'.² Their opponents in the case cited the evidence of bio-archaeology. Whilst quickly backing away from the claim that the remains could in any way be identified as European, they insisted that Kennewick Man had no genetic relationship with present-day Native Americans. In 2002, an Oregon judge reversed an earlier federal finding in favour of reburial and ruled that the controversial skeleton, having no demonstrable connection to the Umatilla, should be retained above ground for further archaeological study. Some observers hailed this as a victory for 'science'. Others were alarmed to find the courts accepting racial indicators such as cranial measurements as evidence of 'cultural affiliation'.

In the evolving dispute, both sides were faced with what they perceived as a fundamental threat to their communal identity, an identity understood by each in different ways as a special relationship with the dead. As I argued in the previous chapter, archaeology as a distinct discipline consists in a privileged and particular relationship to the traces of past life (as, of course, does literary studies). Yet a privileged, inviolable bond with the dead is often no less essential to the self-understanding of ethnic or national communities. The struggles that led to the passage of NAGPRA in the United States, and similar conflicts over the right to Aboriginal remains in Australia, are indicative of the extent to which the right to dispose of its dead is fundamental to the identity and even the existence of a living group. In one infamous pre-NAGPRA case, the remains of two Native Americans were unearthed together with several early European settlers in an Iowa cemetery; while the European bodies were granted local reburial, those of the Native Americans were treated as scientific specimens. The implication was all too clear: whatever community these individuals had belonged to was as dead as they were.³

For some Native American cultures, a secure resting place for the body is necessary for the spirit to enjoy peace in the afterlife.⁴ Yet there is always

² Armand Minthorn, quoted in Smith, *Archaeological Theory*, 165.

³ Smith, *Archaeological Theory*, 28.

⁴ See James Riding In, 'Repatriation: A Pawnee Perspective', *American Indian Quarterly*, 20 (1996), 238–50.

more at stake in a community's claim to custodianship over its dead than concern for their spiritual welfare. As Audie Huber, spokesman for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla, insists, 'It's a fundamental right to protect the grave of your ancestor.'⁵ By asserting and exerting this right over the past, the community ratifies its own continuing existence in the present. The custodianship of graves becomes a way of demarcating the boundaries of the community in both time and space. Firstly, by identifying the dead as 'ancestors' the community asserts its continuity across the centuries (even, in the case of Kennewick Man, across nine millennia). Secondly, and more controversially, it lays claim to a continuing right over the land which contains—and is to some extent composed of—its dead.⁶ As the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council argued in another recent case of conflict between indigenous peoples and archaeologists, 'It is because the people who lived in these caves are our ancestors that we, as a community, are the legitimate owners and custodians of these sites.'⁷

For some, the trumpeting of Kennewick man's 'white' features recalled the overt racism of nineteenth-century American archaeology, with its speculation about the identity of the mysterious 'Moundbuilders'. Like the ruins of Great Zimbabwe in southern Africa, the extraordinary earthen mounds of the Ohio Valley were regarded as far too sophisticated for the indigenous population to have achieved, and were therefore attributed by archaeologists and popular writers to a lost, advanced (and potentially white) civilization.⁸ Thus, what Bruce Trigger terms 'colonial archaeology' served to drive a wedge between the past of a region and its living indigenous population.⁹ If the primary goal was to explain away awkward evidence of past civilizational achievement, colonial archaeology also had the effect of weakening the perceived rootedness of the contemporary population. A people who had inherited no right

⁵ See Anna King, 'Tribes Appeal Bones Ruling', *Tri-City Herald*, 16 Feb. 2005 (<http://www.kennewick-man.com/kman/news/story/6178312p-6051857c.html>).

⁶ See Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 23–30; Paul Turnbull, 'Indigenous Australian People, Their Defense of the Dead and Native Title', in Cressida Fforde, Jane Hubert, and Paul Turnbull (eds.), *The Dead and Their Possessions: Repatriation in Principle, Policy and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002), 63–86.

⁷ Quoted in Smith, *Archaeological Theory*, 189

⁸ Curtis M. Hinsley, 'Digging for Identity: Reflections on the Cultural Background of Collecting', *American Indian Quarterly*, 20 (1996), 180–96.

⁹ See Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 103–8, 119–38.

of custodianship over the land's antiquities could claim little right to the land in the present. If, moreover, the present inhabitants could be branded as the destroyers rather than the descendants of the prior civilization, then dominating or destroying them in turn could be regarded as morally excusable, even necessary.

Although colonial archaeology has been seen as a short-lived and regrettable episode in the development of a modern academic discipline, it is a practice with deep roots in western culture—roots that probably run almost as deep as the metaphor of rootedness itself. This chapter will explore a distinct tradition of colonial archaeology in medieval and early modern Britain and Ireland.¹⁰ The texts I will consider—the late medieval poem *St Erkenwald*, archaeological reports by Matthew Paris and Gerald of Wales, and Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and *View of the State of Ireland*—all describe, from an English point of view, the excavation of the bodies and artefacts of subjugated peoples, namely the ancient Britons (the ancestors of the Welsh), and the Irish. These are narratives of exhumation or recovery which seek to overturn or weaken the claims of the indigenous population to original and continuous possession of the land. Each of these texts features the dramatic disappearance of the exhumed remains, a striking motif which, I shall argue, works to sever the links between the present-day indigenous population and the lands of their ancestors.

St ERKENWALD AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF ENGLISH LIFE

[T]he very dust under your feet responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is the ashes of our ancestors . . . [W]hen the last red man shall have perished from the earth and his memory among white men shall have become a myth, these shores shall swarm with the invisible dead of my

¹⁰ Any use of the term 'colonial archaeology' with reference to this period requires double qualification. The texts discussed below share few of the assumptions and methods of modern archaeology, and the means by which the English state imposed its domination over Wales and Ireland in the pre-modern era can only uneasily be termed colonialism. The ancient and medieval precursors of modern archaeology are well surveyed by Alain Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past: The Origins of Archaeology*, trans. Ian Kinnes and Gillian Varndell (London: British Museum Press, 1996). Michael Hechter argues the case for a colonial reading of England's relations with its neighbours in *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

tribe . . . At night, when the streets of your cities and villages shall be silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts . . .¹¹

What does it take to make the land your own? How long do you have to wait? The words of the Suquamish Chief Seattle (filtered to whatever extent through a journalist's memory and imagination) speak eloquently of the last and perhaps greatest dilemma to confront every conqueror. The rough technologies of ethnic cleansing, bayonets or bulldozers, are ill-equipped for the more complex task that follows. How do you build a homeland (*heimat*, *patria*, *moledet*) in alien soil, full of someone else's dead? How do you subdue—or begin to negotiate with—the dust under your feet?

Almost a millennium after the Anglo-Saxon conquest, questions of this kind still had the capacity to trouble the English imagination. English writers of the later middle ages looked back on the arrival of their ancestors in Britain with a mixture of pride and horror. The conquest of England was understood to have been a devastatingly bloody and brutal enterprise, and it was partly for this very reason that, so many centuries on, it could be regarded as in some sense incomplete. The sins and shortcomings of the first Englishmen are recalled in the opening lines of *St Erkenwald*, composed around 1400, but set in the Anglo-Saxon era:

At London in Englonde noght full long sythen
 Sythen Crist suffrid on crosse and Cristendome stablyd,
 Ther was a byschop in that burgh, blessyd and sacryd;
 Saynt Erkenwolde as I hope that holy man hatte.
 In his tyme in that toun the temple alder-grattyst
 Was drawn down, that one dole, to dedifie new,
 For hit hethen had bene in Hengyst dawes
 That the Saxones unsaght haden sende hyder.
 Thai bete oute the Bretons and broght hom into Wales
 And pervertyd all the pepul that in that place dwellid.
 Then wos this reame renaide mony ronke yeres . . .¹²

¹¹ 'Chief Seattle's Speech: Version 1' in Rudolf Kaiser, 'Chief Seattle's Speech(es): American Origins and European Reception', in Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (eds.), *Recovering the Word: Essays on Native American Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 521. The speech, published in a Seattle newspaper some thirty years after it was supposed to have been delivered, may be largely the invention of the writer, Dr Henry A. Smith.

¹² *St Erkenwald*, ed. Clifford Peterson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), lines 1–11. The letters 'thorn' and 'yogh' have been modernized as 'th' and 'gh'/'y'. As elsewhere, i/j and u/v have been normalized. I have also omitted Peterson's

[At London in England, not very long after Christ suffered on the cross and established Christendom, there was in that city a sacred and blessed bishop named Saint Erkenwald. In his time in that town the greatest of all temples was taken down, that one landmark, to be re-edified, for it had been heathen in the days of Hengist, whom the unappeased Saxons had sent hither. They beat out the Britons and pushed them into Wales, and perverted all the people that dwelled in that place. Then was this realm renegade many rebellious years . . .]

This account accords with the received narrative of the Anglo-Saxon conquest or *adventus Saxonum* as a mass, military migration, by which the native British population was exterminated or expelled from most of what would become known as England. As the earliest historian of the conflict, the sixth-century British monk Gildas, recorded, the conquest was sudden, brutal and total:

All the major towns were laid low by the repeated battering of the enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants—church leaders, priests, and peoples alike, as the swords glinted all around and the flames crackled. It was a sad sight. In the middle of the squares the foundation stones of high walls and towers that had been torn from their lofty base, holy altars, fragments of corpses, covered (as it were) with a purple crust of congealed blood, looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press. There was no burial to be had except in the ruins of houses or the bellies of beasts and birds . . .¹³

Most early written sources tell the same story. In the later middle ages, English and Welsh historical consciousness was shaped by the much-elaborated but essentially similar account of Geoffrey of Monmouth. The unjust Saxon conquest also lay at the centre of archaeological consciousness; according to Geoffrey, Stonehenge has been erected as a memorial to a particular treacherous and bloody massacre of unarmed British chieftains.¹⁴ This dark saga of conquest and ethnic cleansing remains the most widely disseminated version of how England was Anglicized, and also, arguably, the primal narrative of ethnic warfare for English-speaking cultures (bearing more than a passing

notation of 'final marks that may represent e' (71). Further line references in main text. The translation that follows is my own.

¹³ Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. and trans. Michael Winterbottom (London: Phillimore, 1978), 27.

¹⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1966), 164–5, 195–8.

resemblance, for instance, to nineteenth-century accounts of the fall of the Moundbuilders).¹⁵

Widely accepted for some fourteen hundred years, the old account of the *adventus Saxonum* has been sharply challenged in the last twenty years, by archaeologists in particular. It has been pointed out that this narrative rests entirely on the authority of texts, all written many decades if not centuries after the 'conquest'. The material-archaeological evidence for the period in question turns out to be far more ambiguous. Certainly, there is little to corroborate Gildas's testimony as to massive urban destruction. Nor does it seem plausible that Germanic peoples could have launched an invasion so massive as to wipe out the sizeable population of lowland Britain. Although the origins of Anglo-Saxon England remain a matter of lively controversy, what now seems likeliest to many scholars is that some limited immigration from overseas coincided with or triggered the more widespread adoption of Germanic customs by local peoples.¹⁶ The 'invaders' may have consisted of no more than a handful of culturally charismatic warleaders. Anglicization may have been a largely voluntary and opportunistic response to the perceived success of Germanic societies in the north Atlantic world.

Part of the reason the traditional, genocidal version of the Saxon conquest carried such authority in the later middle ages was that it helped explain and give focus to contemporary ethnic antagonisms. The relationship between the English and the Britons (who, 'brought . . . into Wales', had become the Welsh) was far from being finally resolved. As

¹⁵ Compare the scene conjured by J. P. McLean (in *The Mound Builders*, 1885): 'On the temple mounds were probably scenes of carnage. They never would submit to give up these places without offering the most stubborn resistance. Those mounds were covered with multitudes of brave and self-sacrificing men, who shed their blood in defense of their home and religion. The grim visage of war, with its relentless fury, burst upon them, carrying death and destruction in its course. At last this peaceable and quiet people were expelled from the Ohio, and never after returned.' Quoted in Hinsley, 'Digging for Identity', 184–5.

¹⁶ For an introduction to the ongoing debate among archaeologists over the nature and extent of the 'conquest', see Catherine Hills, *The Origins of the English* (London: Duckworth, 2003); Catherine Hills, 'Spong Hill and the Adventus Saxonum', in Catherine E. Karkov, Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley, and Bailey K. Young (eds.), *Spaces of the Living and the Dead: An Archaeological Dialogue*, American Early Medieval Studies 3 (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1999), 15–26; Sam Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), 155–72. Heinrich Härke, whose research indicates a roughly even mix of people of British and Germanic origin in 'Anglo-Saxon' graveyards, has called into question the underlying politics of both the 'migrationist' and 'immobilist' positions. See Härke, 'Archaeologists and Migrations: A Problem of Attitude?', *Current Anthropology*, 39 (1998), 19–45 (including responses from a number of leading archaeologists).

Gerald of Wales saw matters towards the close of the twelfth century, 'the English . . . want to drive the Welsh out of the island and to capture it all for themselves', while the Welsh 'boast, and most confidently predict, that they will soon reoccupy the whole island of Britain . . . The Welsh will then be called Britons once more and they will enjoy their ancient privileges.'¹⁷ The subjugation of Wales by Edward I did nothing to diminish Welsh yearnings for a *reconquista*. The dawn of the fifteenth century witnessed the great rebellion of Owain Glyndwr (1400–9), whose proclaimed aim was to undo the wrongs, not merely of recent English misrule, but of the *adventus Saxonum*.¹⁸

St Erkenwald was composed either immediately before, during, or shortly after the Glyndwr rebellion; its author was very probably a native of Cheshire, on the northern border of Wales.¹⁹ The reminder of ancient history with which the poem commences is thus anything but an antiquarian flourish; what passed between the English and the Britons in the fifth and sixth centuries lies at the root of very recent, very local conflicts. In light of this, it may seem surprising that the poem is so unreservedly hostile in its depiction of the first Englishmen. It would have been quite easy to follow Bede in mitigating the crimes of the conquerors by emphasizing how far the Britons had already drifted from true Christianity; their downfall could have been interpreted, as it was by Gildas and Gerald of Wales, as divine punishment for their sins (homosexuality chief among them). Instead, the poet declines to draw a distinction between the ethnic and religious ramifications of the conquest, all but conflating what the Saxons did to the Britons with what they did to Christianity.

The rapid shifts in temporality in the first seven lines—from the present to the crucifixion, from a Christian London in the seventh century to the days of the heathen Saxons in the fifth century—are perhaps

¹⁷ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales/The Description of Wales*, trans. and ed. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1978), 274, 265.

¹⁸ In a letter to the king of Scotland, Glyndwr stressed his descent from Cadwaladr, last king of the Britons, since whose death the Welsh had been held in bondage by the Saxon usurpers. See *The Chronicle of Adam of Usk, 1377–1421*, trans. and ed. C. Given-Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 149; R. R. Davies, *The Revolt of Owain Glyn Dwr* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁹ Clifford Peterson suggests that 'the poem was probably written sometime between 1380 and 1420, and later in that period rather than earlier' (*St Erkenwald*, 15). The suggestion that the poem incorporates references to royal policies 'in the mid- to late-1390s' nudges the *terminus a quo* even closer to 1400. See Ruth Nissé, '“A Coroun Ful Riche”: The Rule of History in *St Erkenwald*', *ELH* 65 (1998), 278.

intentionally somewhat disorienting.²⁰ The effect is to undermine the reader's naive confidence in a necessarily progressive history, moving from paganism to Christianity, from the Britons to the English, and from darkness into light. The poem finds its chronological resting place in a curiously liminal moment. The heathen temple has been razed by Erkenwald's newly converted flock, but the task of erecting the 'New Werke' which will be St Paul's Cathedral has only just begun. The relationship between the Britons and Saxons remains unclarified. This will be a poem about making repairs, and also about making reparations.

As the workmen employed in the rebuilding of St Paul's delve into the earth to prepare for the laying of the foundation, they make a startling archaeological discovery:

as thai makkyd and mynyd a mervayle thai founden
As yet in crafty cronecles is kydde the memorie,
For as thai dyght and dalfe so depe into the erthe
Thai founden fourmyt on a flore a ferly faire tounge.

(43–6)

[as they built and mined they found a marvel, the memory of which is still kept in crafty chronicles: for as they dug and delved so deep into the earth, they found formed on a floor a wonderfully fair tomb.]

The tomb is richly ornamented and 'enbelicit wyt bryght golde lettres' [embellished with bright gold letters] (line 51) belonging to an unknown tongue. While learned clerks busy themselves fruitlessly to decipher the inscription, a huge crowd of excited Londoners gathers around the tomb. Representatives of every social stratum, from the nobility and the mayor to boisterous apprentices, converge on the spot, mastered, it would seem, not only by curiosity but by the conviction that the contents of the tomb will concern them all. The accidental discovery now becomes a methodical excavation under the joint authority of the mayor and the sacristan. Workmen use iron crowbars to prise the heavy lid off the sarcophagus, revealing an astonishing sight:

a blisfull body opou the bothum lyggid,
Araide on a riche wise in riall wedes.

²⁰ For the various ways the poem collapses chronological distance, including that between the readerly present and the past, I am indebted to the analysis of Naomi Howell, 'The Sinner, the Self and Salvation in *St Erkenwald*', paper given at the 'Medieval Misfits' conference, University of Bristol, Feb. 2005.

Al wyt glisnande golde his gowne was hemmyd

And on his coyfe was kest a coron ful riche
 And a semely septure sett in his honde.
 Als wemles were his wedes wyt-outen any tecche
 Othir of moulyng othir of motes othir moght-freten,
 And als bryght of hor blee in blysnande hewes
 As thai hade yepely in that yorde bene yisturday shapen.
 And als freshe hym the face and the flesh nakyd
 Bi his eres and bi his hondes that openly shewid
 Wyt ronke rode, as the rose, and two rede lippes,
 As he in sounde sodanly were slippid opon slepe.

(lines 76–92)

[A beautiful body lay on the bottom, richly arrayed in royal clothing. His gown was all hemmed with glistening gold . . . And on his cap was set a very rich crown, and a seemly sceptre set in his hand. His clothes were spotless, without any sign of being mouldered, spotted, or moth-eaten, and were as brightly coloured with glistening hues, as if they had been woven yesterday in that churchyard. Likewise his face was fresh, and the visible flesh of his ears and his hands was fresh and ruddy as the rose, with two red lips, as if he in full health had slipped suddenly into sleep.]

Any early reader of *St Erkenwald* would have little difficulty in interpreting the general significance of this spectacle. Accounts of the exhumation of uncorrupted corpses were common enough in medieval England. The body in the sarcophagus could be that, for instance, of Joan of Acre (d. 1305), exhumed at Clare Priory in Suffolk in 1357: 'she was found whole in all her limbs. Her nipples, when pressed by hand, grew erect again; her eyelids, when raised, fell closed again.'²¹ Such miraculous preservation was almost invariably taken as a mark of special divine favour, probably of sainthood; indeed, exhumations like that of Joan of Acre were often undertaken precisely in the hopes that a church or monastery might be able to add a saint to its spiritual assets.²² Who could fail to envy

²¹ John Capgrave, cited in Sheila Delaney, *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints, and Society in Fifteenth-Century England: The Work of Osbern Bokenham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 14. See Siegfried Wenzel, 'St Erkenwald and the Uncorrupted Body', *N&Q* 226 (1981), 13–14.

²² The ulterior motives of the exhumers make it easy to doubt the veracity of many such reports, but cases of apparent incorruption can also be attributed to the special conditions of intramural burial. See Andrew T. Chamberlain and Michael Parker Pearson, *Earthly Remains: The History and Science of Preserved Human Bodies* (London: British Museum Press, 2001), 23–4.

Durham Cathedral, whose uncorrupted body of St Cuthbert (d. 687), disinterred and triumphantly displayed on several occasions, remained an object of veneration and pilgrimage down to the Reformation?²³

Yet it is a mark of *St Erkenwald*'s surprisingly sophisticated historical consciousness that the Londoners do not react to the discovery of the corpse as late medieval English people would do, but rather as the poet imagines early medieval Saxons might, which is to say, with bewilderment and consternation.

How long had he ther layne, his lere so unchaungit,
And all his wede unwemmyd? Thus ylka weghe askyd.
'Hit myght not be bot such a mon in mynde stode long.
He has ben kyng of this kith, as couthely hit semes,
He lyes dolven thus depe; hit is a derfe wonder
Bot summe segge couthe say that he hym sene hade.'

(lines 95–100)

[How long had he lain there, his countenance so unchanged, and his clothing unblemished? So everyone asked. 'It could not be but such a man was long-remembered. He was a king of this land, as seems clear. He lies buried so deep. It would be a great wonder if someone were not able to say he had seen him.]

So the witnesses gathered around the tomb exchange breathless hypotheses. Still inexperienced in Christianity, their minds do not turn instantly to miracle as an explanation. Rather, they are left struggling to process visual cues which, taken together, imply a breakdown in one or another of their cultural givens. They can find no way to tally the position of the sarcophagus (beneath the layer of pagan Saxon occupation) with the freshness of the body and the fabrics, nor the apparent royalty of the deceased with his anonymity. As the dean of St Paul's must eventually confess, there appears to have been a grievous lapse in both living and historical memory.²⁴

we have oure librarie laitid thes long seven dayes,
But one cronicle of this kyng con we never fynde.

²³ See C. F. Battiscombe (ed.), *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 1–114.

²⁴ An important function of the medieval tomb was to stimulate and preserve both individual and communal memory, making 'what is remote in time or space present to the visitor'. See Elizabeth Valdez del Alamo with Carol Stamatis Pendergast, 'Introduction', in *Memory and the Medieval Tomb* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 10. The failure of this tomb in the poem to fulfill this function seems to indicate a concomitant failure either in living individuals or in the community as a whole.

He has non layne here so long, to loke hit by kynde,
To malte so out of memorie bot mervayle hit were.

(lines 155–8)

[We have searched through our library for seven long days, but we have not found one chronicle of this king. He has not lain here so long, to judge by his appearance, to melt so completely out of memory, without its being a marvel.]

We can grasp something of the Saxons' disorientation and anxiety when we consider our own ambivalent cultural response to the discovery and display of 'bog bodies'—that is, the remains of Iron Age men and women preserved for millennia in the peat bogs of north-western Europe. Indeed, there are significant parallels between these celebrated corpses and the body discovered in *St Erkenwald*.²⁵ Due to the preservative qualities of sphagnum peat, the flesh, hair, and garments of the 'bog people' appear after two thousand years almost as they did in life, despite discolouration. Even their final facial expressions sometimes remain to be read. Like the corpse in the poem, the bog body known as the Tollund Man appeared to the Danish archaeologist P. V. Glob to have just 'slippid opon slepe': 'He lay on his damp bed as though asleep, resting on his side, the head inclined a little forward, arms and legs bent. His face wore a gentle expression—the eyes lightly closed, the lips softly pursed, as if in gentle prayer'²⁶ (Fig. 1). Also reminiscent of *St Erkenwald* is the frequent reluctance of lay people to accept that a body so well preserved can have died more than a short while ago. Glob records how sceptical villagers and national newspapers combined to insist that the Grauballe Man was in fact a peat-cutter who had died in living memory, rather than an Iron Age victim of ritual sacrifice.²⁷

Today, crowds in the British Museum cluster around the case containing Lindow Man as thickly as Saxons around the sarcophagus in St Paul's. They do so for at least some of the same reasons. To look on a

²⁵ There are no recorded responses to bog bodies in medieval England, nor could such discoveries have been common before the development of modern turf-cutting machinery. Intriguingly, however, the strongest candidate for authorship of *St Erkenwald*, John Massey of Cotton, lived less than ten miles from Lindow Moss. (See Clifford J. Peterson, 'The Pearl-Poet and John Massey of Cotton, Cheshire', *RES* 25 (1974), 257–66. Although few scholars now regard *St Erkenwald* as a work of the Pearl poet, the case for Massey as the author of *Erkenwald* still merits attention.) Given that there is no known textual source for the poem's narrative, it is at least conceivable that one 'source' for the body in *St Erkenwald* was found in the bog.

²⁶ P. V. Glob, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved*, trans. Rupert Bruce-Mitford (Ithaca, NY: New York, 1969), 18.

²⁷ Ibid. 59–62.

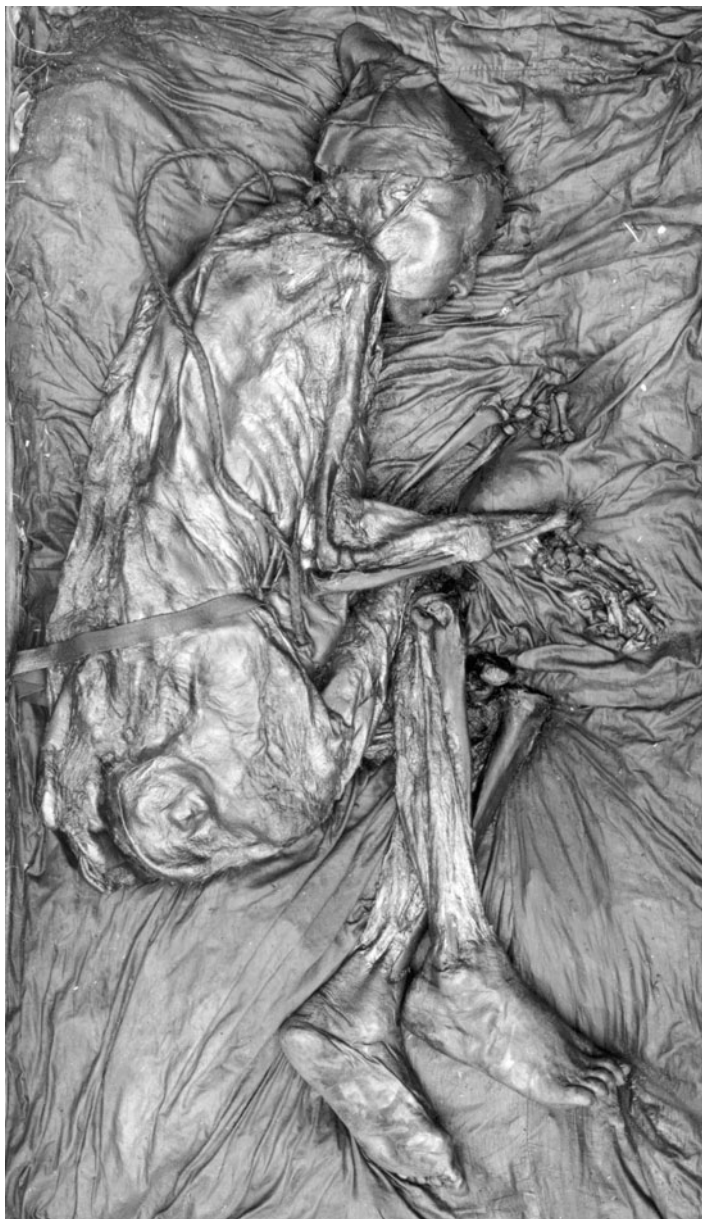


Fig. 1. The Tollund Man. Lennart Larsen/National Museum of Denmark

lifelike human form which we know to be not only dead but thousands of years old is both fascinating and disorienting, disrupting some of the fundamental categories by which we organize our perception of the world.²⁸ It is comparable, with respect to time, with the sort of optical illusion whereby an object in the far distance appears close enough to touch—as the hand closes on emptiness, the perspective lurches and the head swims. Wreaking havoc with the temporal equivalent of depth perception, the queasy fascination of the preserved body consists not only in making what is far away seem near, but also in robbing the ‘near’ of its wonted security and familiarity. Thus, the Londoners in the poem do not simply experience the simultaneous failure of living and historical memory, but a collapse of the distinction between these two modes of memory. According to the evidence of their eyes, the body is *both* ancient and recent, belonging at once to the realm of ‘cronicle’ and the time when ‘summe segge couthe say that he hym sene hade’—unable to locate the deceased in either of these temporalities, they can no longer be sure even of locating themselves.²⁹ Something like this peculiar blending of unanticipated intimacy and self-alienation is captured in the conclusion of Seamus Heaney’s ‘Tollund Man’, which imagines a pilgrimage to the site where that famous body was exhumed:

Out there in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.³⁰

For the Saxons in St Paul’s, the anxiety provoked by the unidentifiable body is intensified by the fact that they have only recently undergone a sharp transition from one mode of cultural memory (pagan tradition) to another (Christian lore). The disorienting spectacle can be seen to crystallize their own dislocation from their cultural past, whilst at the same time suggesting a failure in the new system’s explanatory power. Universal consternation threatens to break out in public disorder. Word must be sent in haste to Bishop Erkenwald, who is absent from the city, of ‘troubull in the pepul | And suche a cry aboute a cors, crakit evermore’ [trouble in the people, and such a cry about a corpse, sounding

²⁸ See Jennifer Wallace, *Digging the Dirt: The Archaeological Imagination* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 53–77.

²⁹ Cf. Howell, ‘The Sinner, the Self and Salvation in *St Erkenwald*’, on ‘the tension between the effects of vastness and tight proximity’ in the poem.

³⁰ Seamus Heaney, *New Selected Poems: 1966–1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 32.

constantly] (lines 109–10). Erkenwald hastens back to London and spends a night in earnest prayer in his palace before coming forth to view the miraculous body. He gently rebukes the dean, who reports the fruitless efforts in the library, by reminding him that divine providence transcends the power of human reason. Then, at the precise midpoint of the 352-line poem, ‘he turns to the tounge and talkes to the corce’ (line 177), commanding it in Christ’s name to reveal its identity, the length of its entombment, and the fate of its soul.

The corpse stirs slightly and, endowed for the moment with ‘sum lant gost-lyfe’ [some borrowed ghost-life], begins to speak in a dreary voice. He explains that, in spite of his royal regalia, he was ‘Never kyng ne cayser’ (line 199), but rather a judge in the city of ‘New Troie’ (London) in the reign of Belinus, 382 years before the birth of Christ. (The name of the ruler, like that of the city, derives from Geoffrey of Monmouth.) Such was his wisdom and fairness as law-giver to an unruly people that, upon his death, ‘Thai coronyd me the kidde kyng of kene justises’ [they crowned me the acknowledged king of wise judges] (line 254). Erkenwald is deeply moved (‘wyt bale at his hert’, line 257) by the judge’s tale, as are all the auditors, many of whom are weeping silently. The bishop now seeks to understand the body’s extraordinary survival. Interestingly, he is less impressed by the preservation of the corpse itself—‘Thi body may be embawmyd, hit bashis me noght’ [thy body may be embalmed, that does not disconcert me] (line 261)—than by the perfect condition of the fabric. The judge replies that this preservation owes nothing to human art, but is a reward granted by God in recognition of his justice. Sadly, this reward extends to the body only; with great groans, the judge reveals that his soul is in limbo, for he died ignorant of God and his covenant. Weeping copiously, Erkenwald wishes that the corpse could be granted but a moment of life in which to be baptized, and he pronounces the baptismal formula he would recite on that hypothetical occasion. In the same moment one of his tears splashes on to the face of the dead judge. The body then gives a sigh, and announces that the bishop’s tear has accomplished his baptism. In that very moment, his soul has been set to supper at the lord’s table.

What follows is one of the most vivid short passages in alliterative poetry, a remarkable description of bodily dissolution.

Wyt this cessayd his sowne, sayd he no more.
 Bot sodenly his swete chere swyndid and faylid
 And all the blee of his body was blakke as the moldes
 As roten as the rottok that rises in powdere.

For as sone as the soule was sesyd in blisse,
Corrupt was that othir crafte that covert the bones.

(lines 341–6)

[With this his voice ceased and he said no more. But suddenly his sweet expression faded and failed, and all the colour of his body was as black as mould, as rotten as the decayed matter that rises in powder. For as soon as the soul was possessed of bliss, the material that covered the bones decomposed.]

The poem concludes by heralding the confirmation of the Saxon's faith and the reintegration of civil society as a result of this miracle.

Then was lovyng oure Lord wyt loves up-halden,
Meche mournyng and myrthe was mellyd to-geder;
Thai passyd forthe in processioun and alle the pepull folowid
And all the belles in the burgh beryd at ones.

(lines 349–52)

[Then our lord was praised with uplifted hands, much mourning and mirth were mingled together. They passed forth in procession and all the people followed, and all the bells in the city rang out at once.]

Discussions of *St Erkenwald* tend to focus on the quite serious theological problems thrown up by the unorthodox manner of the judge's baptism. The poem participates in an important medieval controversy over whether and how a righteous pagan might merit (or, in the absence of merit, nevertheless achieve) salvation. The best-known case, recounted by Dante and Langland among others, was that of the just emperor Trajan, whose salvation was secured through the intercession of Pope Gregory the Great.³¹ In one possible source for *St Erkenwald*, a fourteenth-century commentary on Dante by Jacopo della Lana, Trajan's tongue (the instrument of his justice) remains 'rigida, carnosia e fresca', and thus able to plead his case with Gregory, though the rest of the body has been reduced to skeletal remains.³² There is, however, no direct precedent in the righteous pagan tradition for the two most striking incidents in the poem, the revelation of the intact body and the subsequent crumbling of that body into dust. The discussion that follows will focus

³¹ See Gordon Whatley, 'Heathens and Saints: St Erkenwald in its Legendary Context', *Speculum*, 61 (1986), 330–63; Cindy L. Vitto, 'The Virtuous Pagan in Middle English Literature', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 79: 5 (1989), 1–100.

³² Quoted in Whatley, 'Heathens and Saints', 335.

on these two archaeological moments which, taken together, identify the poem as participating in a distinct tradition of English colonial archaeology.

As noted previously, reports of uncorrupted corpses were not uncommon in the later middle ages, and the miraculous significance of the phenomenon was well understood. Usually, but by no means always, incorruption was interpreted as a sign of sainthood. Alternatively, it might signify a need for intercession or absolution from the living. The *Golden Legend* tells of a monk who rejected his vows and who, consequently, was rejected by the earth, failing to decompose until buried with a consecrated host.³³ Participants in the 'Wednesday fast' hoped their weekly sacrifice would secure them access to clerical intercession, whatever sudden or horrible form their death might take. Rhymes reported crushed, drowned, and decapitated fasters calling out for the sacraments:

At the battle of Durham/I rede there was a head
Fifty year under earth/that lay so long dead
A squire heard a voice/that rode the water by
For Wednesday's fast/after a priest I cry.³⁴

In the case of the voluble Durham head, as in that of the pagan judge, speech after death turns out to signify not sanctity in heaven but business left unfinished on earth. Similarly, in both the first and the last books of the Bible, it is unfinished business that prompts the blood of the dead to cry out from the ground. Here the plea is for intercession, not in the form of prayers or rites, but of vengeance. In Genesis, God demands of Cain, 'What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground' (4: 10). In Revelation, Christian martyrs are revealed 'under the altar', loudly appealing to God to 'judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth' (6: 9–10). Medieval tradition affords various stories of slaughtered bodies which do not simply appeal to God for vengeance, but take an active role in apprehending their murderers, for instance by beginning to bleed

³³ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 311 n.118.

³⁴ Quoted in Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 320. The Durham story recalls a miracle of Saint Barbara, in which a decapitated head receives communion and is reunited with its body, though without coming back to life; see Bynum, *Resurrection of the Body*, 208.

afresh when the guilty party is near.³⁵ The most well known of such murder victims is the little boy in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* who, in spite of having had his throat cut to the bone, reveals the hiding place of his body by singing 'alma redemptoris mater'. Although his song is one of devotion rather than vengeance, its providential consequence is the apprehension and execution by torture of a large number of Jews. The Prioress draws the moral: 'Mordre wol out, certeyn, it wol nat faille.'³⁶

How might the tradition of the corpse that survives to call down vengeance on its persecutors have a bearing on *St Erkenwald*? The judge himself has not been a victim of murder; his ending, like his life, seems to have been perfectly just. Yet it is no accident that the poem begins with a reminder of an old and as-yet-unexpiated crime, the destruction of native British society and religion by the heathen Saxon invaders. 'Thai bete oute the Bretons and broght hom into Wales | And pervertyd all the pepul that in that place dwellid. | Then wos this reame renaide mony ronke yeres . . .' This inaugural deed of violation casts its shadow over the opening movement of the poem, up to the discovery of the mysterious sarcophagus. When the 'blissful body' of the British judge emerges from the foundations of St Paul's he can be identified as the symbolic victim of all the crimes perpetrated against his compatriots, crimes for which there has still been no vengeance. Like the child in the *Prioress's Tale*, the speaking corpse in *St Erkenwald* reveals the sins not of a single malefactor, but of an entire race. There is ample cause here for 'troubull in the pepul'.

Yet by the end of the poem the fear and doubt of the Saxons will have been transformed into joy and devotion. The demands of the British dead are satisfied in *St Erkenwald*, not by vengeance, but by reparation. The reparation imagined here is magnificently contrived, a precise reversal of the original violation. For the slaughter and perversion of Christian Britons by pagan Saxons, the poem offers the revivification and baptism of a pagan Briton by a Christian Saxon. As befits the text's concern with law and justice, this miracle has been weighed perfectly in the scales. Erkenwald's deed amounts to both less and more than

³⁵ In *Richard III*, the presence of the murderer Richard causes the wounds of the dead King Henry VI to 'Ope their congealed mouths and bleed afresh' (1.2.56).

³⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Prioress's Tale', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), line 576. The point was seemingly proved anew in 1983, when the discovery of the first of the Lindow bog bodies prompted a spontaneous confession of murder from a man who had disposed of his wife in the bog twenty years before. See Chamberlain and Pearson, *Earthly Remains*, 69.

an apology for past wrongs. Taking place at the utmost foundation or 'flore' of St Paul's, the miracle implies a reconstruction of British history itself, built this time on a cohesive basis, free of internal divisions and antagonisms. The Saxon bishop thus accomplishes what Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' can only dream of doing: 'to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed'.³⁷

The ideal of history on a new foundation is complicated, however, by the fate that befalls the judge's body in the final lines of the poem. 'As roten as the rottok that rises in powdere . . . Corrupt was that othir crafte that covert the bones.' In the larger context of the miracle, this dramatic decomposition simply confirms the arrival of the judge's soul at the eternal banquet—what need has he of his body now? Yet the startling imaginative power and graphic detail of these few lines (what to a modern reader seems their horror film quality) suggest that there is more at stake in the corporeal disintegration of the judge than the exaltation of his spirit at the expense of his flesh. One might add that rapid rotting is not normally (if ever, outside this poem) considered a sign of sanctity, but rather the reverse. Even here, the melancholy reference to the judge's 'swete chere' having 'faylid' and the unpleasant details that follow pull against the uplifting spiritual import of the passage.

The full significance of the judge's disintegration becomes apparent only when considered within the context of a textual tradition quite distinct from the good pagan controversy, or the usual sort of miracle story. As Monika Otter has argued, *St Erkenwald* participates in the medieval genre of *inventiones*.³⁸ A distinct branch of hagiography, *inventiones* recount the discovery, usually by excavation, of holy relics, usually in the form of human remains. Among the most well-known instances are Saint Helen's discovery of the True Cross in Palestine and, in England, the unearthing of the remains of the protomartyr Alban (their location having been revealed in a dream to the eighth-century

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 249. As Monika Otter suggests, the poem not only affirms that 'the past has something to give to the present' but expresses 'the paradoxical wish to reverse that relationship, to give something back to the past, to reach back through history and put right what went wrong there'. "'New Werke": *St Erkenwald*, St Albans, and the Medieval Sense of the Past', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 24 (1994), 387–414. See also John Longo, 'The Vision of History in *St Erkenwald*', *In Geardagum*, 8 (1987), 35–51.

³⁸ Monika Otter, *Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-Century English Historical Writing* (Chapel Hill, CH: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 157–61.



Fig. 2. Medieval archaeology: the exhumation of St Alban. Matthew Paris, *Vie de Saint Auban*, Trinity College Dublin MS 177

Anglo-Saxon King Offa). The illustration of the latter *inventio* by the thirteenth-century monk Matthew Paris highlights the process of excavation as well as the drama of discovery (Fig. 2). *Inventiones* are, in short, the primary medieval form of archaeological narrative. *St Erkenwald*, I will argue, participates in a distinct sub-genre of *inventio* whose spirit is that of colonial archaeology.

Naturally, the vast majority of *inventiones* do not conclude with the disintegration of the excavated relic. (The whole point of most of these stories, after all, is to authenticate relics in the possession of a particular monastery or church.) None the less, *St Erkenwald* is not the first *inventio* in which this kind of dissolution takes place—more specifically, in which the relics or remains of ancient Britons crumble to dust before English eyes. Indeed, something very similar to the dissolution of the judge is reported to have taken place at the Abbey of St Albans early in the eleventh century.³⁹ If any part of Matthew Paris's account is genuine, the investigations of the successive abbots

³⁹ Matthew Paris, *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley, i, Rolls Series 28.4 (London: Longman, 1867), 24–8.

Ealdred and Eadmar into the remains of Roman Verulamium (the predecessor to St Albans) rank among the most significant examples of archaeological fieldwork in medieval England.⁴⁰ Their discoveries included shells and rusty anchors (indicating the former presence of a large waterway), a cave which seemed to have been inhabited by a dragon, and an ancient cemetery, with glass vessels containing the dust of the dead. Here too were the altars and idols of the pagan gods, which were broken into pieces on Eadmar's orders. The monks also hastened to burn a collection of books containing pagan invocations and idolatrous rites. Another book, found in a remarkably good state of preservation, proved incomprehensible until an elderly monk named Unwona was able to identify the language as ancient British, and the text as the *Passion of St Alban*. No sooner had he translated it into Latin, however, than 'the first and original exemplar—wonderful to relate!—suddenly fell to nothing, reduced irretrievably to dust'.⁴¹

The *Passion of St Alban* thus joins Geoffrey of Monmouth's fabled source, the 'vetustissimus liber', among the lost British books for which later antiquarians would seek in vain.⁴² The disappearance of the exemplar is of course so convenient as to be highly suspicious, though not all scholars have agreed in dismissing the story out of hand.⁴³ The crumbling of the book is presumably to be taken as a sign that the purpose for which it was preserved has been fulfilled in Unwona's translation; the absence of the British original thus serves, in a paradoxical way, to authenticate the Latin copy. Yet while the ostensible significance of the events may be quite different, it is hard to ignore the fact that the textual record of early British Christianity ends up in exactly the same condition as the incinerated pagan books and the shattered idols. If these excavations involve a quest for origins, they

⁴⁰ See Schnapp, *Discovery of the Past*, 98–9; Otter, *Inventiones*, 55, 178 n. 145 (noting the parallels with *St Erkenwald*). More recent excavations illuminating the relationship of Roman town to English monastery are discussed by Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjolbye-Biddle, 'The Origins of St Albans Abbey: Romano-British Cemetery and Anglo-Saxon Monastery', in Martin Henig and Phillip Lindley (eds.), *Alban and St Albans: Roman and Medieval Architecture, Art and Archaeology* (Leeds: British Archaeological Association, 2001), 45–77.

⁴¹ 'Cum autem conscripta historia in Latino pluribus, ut jam dictum est, innotuisset, exemplar primitivum ac originale,—quod mirum est dictu,—irrestaurabiliter in pulverem subito redactum, cecidit annullatum.' Matthew Paris, *Gesta Abbatum*, 27.

⁴² See Philip Schwytzer, *Literature, Nationalism and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴³ Florence McCulloch, 'Saints Alban and Amphibalus in the Works of Matthew Paris: Dublin, Trinity College MS 177', *Speculum*, 56 (1981), 766 n. 28.

also seem to constitute an assault on origins. Excavation is always an act of destruction, but here the destruction is unusually thorough and programmatic. Not only are the idols smashed, but the underground passages (home, it is claimed, to thieves and prostitutes) are 'destroyed, filled in or stopped up'.⁴⁴ Just as the providential crumbling of the British book grants Unwona's translation the authority of the original, so the demolition of layers of prior habitation seems designed to grant the Anglo-Saxon abbey (reputedly founded by King Offa in the eighth century) a foundational status to which it could not otherwise lay claim.⁴⁵ Henceforth, it will be the 'flore' from which all future construction shall arise. The only thing left below, the only discovery the monks have taken care to preserve for posterity is, strangely enough, the dragon's cave.

The dig undertaken some two centuries later at Glastonbury is far better known today than the excavations at Verulamium, and was much more widely publicized at the time.⁴⁶ Around 1191, apparently acting on instructions from the late Henry II (d. 1189), the monks began to dig between two pyramids in the abbey cemetery. A large crowd was permitted to attend, but the excavation site itself was screened from view by curtains. At the extraordinary depth of sixteen feet, they discovered a coffin containing the remains of a man and a woman, together with an inscribed cross identifying the occupants as King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. Although nothing was left of the bodies but bones (huge and riddled with wounds in the case of Arthur), one item in the grave had somehow escaped corruption. 'A tress of woman's hair, blond, and still fresh and bright in colour, was found in the coffin. One of the monks snatched it up and it immediately crumbled into dust.'⁴⁷ The remains of the king and the queen, minus the tress, were then granted a solemn reburial in the abbey church.

Gerald tells the story of the Glastonbury excavation twice, in *De principis instructione* written shortly after the event and in *Speculum ecclesiae*, composed some twenty-five years later. While his first account of the

⁴⁴ Matthew Paris, *Gesta Abbatum*, 24: 'diruit, implevit, aut obturavit'.

⁴⁵ Julia Crick, 'Offa, Aelfric and the Refoundation of Saint Albans', in Henig and Lindley (eds.), *Alban and St Albans*, 78–84.

⁴⁶ See Antonia Gransden, 'The Growth of the Glastonbury Traditions and Legends in the Twelfth Century', in James P. Carley (ed.), *Glastonbury Abbey and the Arthurian Tradition* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 29–53.

⁴⁷ Gerald of Wales, from *De principis instructione*, in *The Journey Through Wales*, 282. The original passage is reprinted in Carley (ed.), *Glastonbury Abbey*, 621.

incident of Guinevere's hair, quoted above, is brief and straightforward, the later version is much expanded, both in descriptive detail (the hair is now 'plaited and coiled with consummate skill') and moral commentary: the monk's leap into the grave is a descent into the Abyss, the hair symbolizes the lure of feminine loveliness, and its crumbling is 'some sort of miracle' revealing the transitoriness of physical beauty. Yet, in the wider political context of Arthur's exhumation, the disintegrating tress takes on a different significance. A large part of Henry II's motivation in commissioning these 'discoveries' was to demonstrate to the unruly Welsh that Arthur, their prophesied deliverer, was genuinely and irrevocably dead.⁴⁸ Rather than seeking to dismiss or belittle the fabled Arthur—whose fame was spreading rapidly through western Europe in precisely this period—the king and the monks of Glastonbury conspired to enhance and give a centre to his cult, while at the same time clarifying the relationship between the Arthurian past and the Angevin present.⁴⁹ The monk in Gerald's anecdote is seduced, I would argue, not only by feminine lures, but by the fantasy that the past—so vivid and alluring, seeming close enough to touch—is indeed recoverable. His embarrassed fate thus stands as a warning to the Welsh not to fall into the same error, of which the only outcome can be a still more total and brutal sundering of the present from the past.

Matthew Paris's account of the St Albans excavations, Gerald's two versions of the Glastonbury dig, and *St Erkenwald* may all be described as *inventiones*, though none is of the most usual type. In none of these cases do the excavators achieve permanent possession of a holy relic. Instead, each narrative recounts the discovery of a miraculously surviving remnant of the ancient Britons which crumbles to dust upon intimate contact with a living Englishman (the contact taking the form, variously, of a translation, a grasp, and a teardrop). Together, I suggest, these quasi-*inventiones* comprise an identifiable tradition of medieval English colonial archaeology.⁵⁰ Centuries after the Britons

⁴⁸ Gransden, 'Growth of the Glastonbury Traditions', 49

⁴⁹ On the collaboration between a succession of kings and the monks of Glastonbury in promoting the secular cult of Arthur, see Gransden, 'Growth of the Glastonbury Traditions', 48–9; and Julia Crick, 'The Marshalling of Antiquity: Glastonbury's Historical Dossier', in Lesley Abrams and James P. Carley (eds.), *The Archaeology and History of Glastonbury Abbey* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1991), 218–19.

⁵⁰ One other twelfth-century narrative should perhaps be mentioned in this context. In *De nugis curialium*, Walter Map tells the story of an ancient British king named Herla,

were supposed to have been slaughtered or driven into Wales, these texts confront the enduring presence of the old possessors just beneath the shallow foundations of English life. While each affords the old Britons a measure of respect and even reverence—as hagiographers, as magnificent rulers, as virtuous pagans—each concludes by expunging the last traces of prior indigenous habitation from English soil. This is how one makes homeland.

The ethnic cleansing of British history is not, to be sure, the sum of what *St Erkenwald* is 'about'. Had the poem come down to us without the last dozen lines, concluding with the redeemed judge's final words to the saint ('Fro bale has broght us to bliss, blessed thou worth!'), it would lack little of its emotional richness and poignant spiritual mystery. In an important sense, the poem is already complete before the disintegration of the judge's body; the scales of history have been restored to balance through Erkenwald's miraculous act of reparation for the crimes of his pagan ancestors. Nevertheless, if the final lines do not hold the key to the poem's mystery, they offer an important clarification as to its meaning. The British body crumbles to dust, and the English turn their backs on it to pass forth in procession: they have squared their accounts, but that does not mean they are entering into a partnership. What lies ahead of them is the erection of a new cathedral, and a new society, on purely English foundations—foundations which will be troubled neither by unexpiated guilt nor by an abiding British presence.

who visits the king of the dead for three days in his subterranean palace. Upon departure, the king presents him with a bloodhound. 'Herla is to carry it on his horse and he and those with him are to take care not to dismount before the dog does; if they do, they risk being turned into dust. When Herla emerges from the cave he learns . . . that two centuries have passed since his departure . . . A new population, the Saxons, now occupy the land of the Britons. He is condemned to wander forever with his army, since the dog will never jump to the ground.' (See Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 112.) Although this story is not an *inventio* or archaeological narrative, it bears some clear correspondences with the tradition discussed here. The unnaturally preserved Briton emerges from the underground realm of the dead into an Anglicized kingdom; although he does not actually crumble to dust, the threat of doing so is sufficient to rob him of his connection with the land which was once his own, but which he now can never touch. Beyond Britain, a still closer parallel in some respects is found in Boccaccio, who reports the discovery in a cave near Trapani in 1342 of a gigantic seated figure which, upon being touched, fell to ashes. The story, which occurs in *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, Bk. IV, cap. LXVIII, must have been recorded very near the date of Matthew Paris's *Gesta abbatum*. See Cornelia C. Coulter, 'Boccaccio's Archaeological Knowledge', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 41 (1937), 403 n. 1.

'SAVAGE SOIL': SPENSER AND THE IRISH EARTH

Had the poet of *St Erkenwald* been able to look ahead almost two hundred years, to the reign of Elizabeth, he might well have concluded with dismay that Owain Glyndwr had triumphed in the end. Like the Welsh rebel, the Tudors boasted their descent from the ancient kings of Britain, and their remarkable rise to power was heralded as a reversal of the Saxon conquest.⁵¹ In *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser would trace the tribulations and triumphs of the 'Briton blood', from its origins in Troy, to its providential restoration to the throne in the person of Henry VII. As a militant English settler in Ireland, Spenser was an early theorist of 'British empire'.⁵² Yet, revolutions in nomenclature aside, the challenge facing Britons trying to build a homeland in Ireland were not so different from those that had earlier confronted the English on British soil. Spenser is often thought of today as the archetypal colonial poet, notorious for his uncompromising advocacy of policies of extreme violence. Yet he was also an archaeological writer. In *The Faerie Queene* and, above all, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, I shall argue, the problem that preoccupies him is not so much how to get the wayward Irish into the earth, as how to get them out of it.

The first explicit reference to Ireland in *The Faerie Queene* occurs in Book 2, canto 9, as Arthur and Sir Guyon are waylaid outside the walls of the Castle of Alma by a horde of ragged villains. Like 'a swarme of Gnats . . . Out of the fennes of Allan' (2.9.16), these enemies are innumerable and exasperating, but easily dispersed by a gust of righteous knightly violence. The reference to the great bog on the border of Spenser's Munster estate serves as an inducement to identify this rabble as exemplars of Irish rebellion and disorder.⁵³ Yet one thing

⁵¹ Schwyzer, *Literature, Nationalism and Memory*, 13–48. In a remarkable sign of the times, Guinevere, last seen in the form of bones and dust, was re-exhumed following the dissolution of Glastonbury Abbey and found to be miraculously preserved. According to Sir John Harington, 'her body and face in show plainly to be discerned, save the very tip of her nose, as divers dwelling there about have reported'. See Charles T. Wood, 'Guinevere at Glastonbury: A Problem in Translation(s)', in James P. Carley (ed.), *Glastonbury Abbey and the Arthurian Tradition* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 86–7.

⁵² David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 52–5.

⁵³ Richard McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 128–29; M. M. Gray, 'The Influence of Spenser's Irish Experiences on *The Faerie Queene*', *RES* 6 (1930), 413–28.

sets this particular band of rascals apart from others in the text, and in Spenser's Irish experience. They appear not to be alive.

Thus as he spoke, loe with outrageous cry
 A thousand villeins round about them swarmd
 Out of the rockes and caves adioyning nye,
 Vile caytive wretches, ragged, rude, deformd,
 All threatning death, all in straunge manner armd,
 Some with unweldy clubs, some with long speares,
 Some rusty knives, some staves in fire warmd.
 Sterne was their looke, like wild amazed steares,
 Staring with hollow eyes, and stiffe upstanding heares.

(2.9.13)

Is this a 'hubbub' of rebellious kerns, or a horde of reanimated corpses? The creatures literally exhume themselves 'out of the rocks and caves'. With their tattered clothing, deformed flesh, and hollow eye sockets, they bear the marks of decomposition. Their 'outrageous' battle cries and assortment of armaments are appropriate to Irish rebels, but the rust on the knives suggests that the weapons they clutch may be their own grave goods.⁵⁴ One is tempted to reach for the word 'zombie' (which entered the English language only in the nineteenth century). Given the reference to the bog of Allen, it would not be amiss to describe these beings as Irish bog bodies.

For all their noise and menace, the throngs of undead are curiously ineffectual in battle against Guyon and Arthur. Mere contact with the 'bright-burning blades' of the living transforms them into (or reveals them as) 'idle shades: | For though they bodies seem, yet substance from their fades' (2.9.15). The fate of these wretches recalls that of the judge in the denouement of *St Erkenwald*. Once again, the weirdly preserved remains of the land's indigenous inhabitants are seen to dissolve on contact with representatives of the conquering tribe. The crucial difference is that whereas in *St Erkenwald* the contact is gentle, sacramental, and expiatory, in the form of a teardrop, here it comes on the unforgiving edge of a sword.

If there are distant echoes of *St Erkenwald*, the passage involves a more direct recollection of Gerald of Wales—not, perhaps, of the incident of

⁵⁴ Burial with grave goods was not commonly practised in Ireland after the coming of Christianity, but it was known that the warriors of ancient Ireland had been entombed with their weapons. See Susan Leigh Fry, *Burial in Medieval Ireland, 900–1500* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 76.

Guinevere's hair at Glastonbury, but of an event that occurred at the outset of the invasion of Ireland in 1169. As recorded in *Expugnatio Hibernica*, one night shortly after their landing at Wexford, the Anglo-Norman army was encamped on the site of an 'old fortification' (*castellario antiquo*—possibly an Iron Age hill fort).

Suddenly there were, as it seemed, countless thousands of troops rushing upon them from all side and engulfing all before them in the ferocity of their attack. This was accompanied by no small din of arms and clashing of axes, and a fearsome shouting which filled the heavens. Apparitions of this sort used to occur frequently in Ireland around military expeditions.⁵⁵

As in *The Faerie Queene*, the onslaught is sudden and unexpected, the enemy innumerable, the din deafening. In both texts, the attack takes place on the threshold of a castle or fortification, and in each case is resisted by just two living warriors—Gerald names them as Meilor and Robert de Barry, who alone in the army do not flee in panic at the uncanny assault. Though Gerald asserts that such apparitions have been frequent in Ireland, he mentions no further occasions. Significantly, the attack of phantoms occurs shortly after—and implicitly in response to—the invaders' first entry into Ireland. Similarly, in *The Faerie Queene*, the attack of the undead marks the introduction of Ireland into the poem as an explicit allegorical context. For both writers, then, the battle against 'idle shades' serves as an initiation into or first step towards the work of Irish conquest. To vary an Elizabethan phrase, he who would Ireland win, must with phantoms first begin.

The captain of the 'caytive wretches' is the hideous Maleger, whom Arthur meets in single combat in canto 11. Like his followers, Maleger appears to have just stepped out of the grave. For a helmet he wears 'a dead man's skull' (2.11.22) and is himself 'of such subtile substance and unsound, | That like a ghost he seem'd, whose grave-clothes were unbound' (2.11.20). Yet unlike the others, Maleger does not melt away on contact with cold steel; rather, the drastic injuries Arthur heaps upon him do nothing to diminish his malevolent vigour. Having pierced his opponent through, Arthur watches expectantly for the result:

drawing backe, he looked evermore
When the hart bloud should gush out of his chest,
Or his dead corse should fall upon the flore;

⁵⁵ Gerald of Wales *Expugnatio Hibernica: The Conquest of Ireland*, ed. and trans. A. B. Scott and F. X. Martin (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1978), 38–9.

But his dead corse upon the flore fell nathemore.

(2.11.37)

The repetition of the penultimate line with only minor variation crystallizes the uncanny horror of the moment in which we and Arthur grasp the true nature of the adversary. In the first half of the couplet, 'dead corse' denotes what Arthur believes Maleger has now become (he is dead and therefore should fall down). In the second line, however, 'dead corse' denotes what Maleger *is* and has been from the start (he is dead and so does not fall down). With this realization, even the heroic Arthur is smitten with 'trembling terror', wondering if his opponent is a fiend, or else some 'wandring ghost, that wanted funerall' (2.11.39). Only when he deduces that the 'dead-living swain' (2.11.44) draws his vital energy from his mother, the earth, does Arthur solve the puzzle of how to kill him permanently. With a somewhat deflating literal-mindedness, he lifts Maleger off the ground, squeezes the life out of him, and tosses the body in a lake.

The depiction of Maleger knits together two distinct traditions, medieval ghost lore and classical myth. Both the captain in his winding sheet and his ragged, decomposing followers recall the fifteenth-century's fascination with macabre images of decomposing cadavers and dancing—or armed—skeletons (Fig. 3). Ghosts were not always imagined as disembodied spirits, but sometimes as beings arising from the grave in corporeal—or semi-corporeal—form. An account from Yorkshire (c.1400) records how a woman dug 'her fingers deeply into the flesh of the spirit, as if the flesh of the spirit were a putrid phantasm, and not solid';⁵⁶ this is very much in line with Spenser's description of Maleger's flesh as being of 'subtile substance and unsound [i.e. rotten]'. Such beings were capable of inflicting physical harm upon the living, and sometimes did so. Ghostly violence required reciprocally violent exorcism; when the curate of Kirkby returned from death to gouge out his former mistress's eyes, his body was exhumed from the churchyard and thrown into a pond.⁵⁷ The fate Arthur chooses for Maleger echoes late medieval practice in cases of this kind.

The second major source for this episode is the myth of Hercules and the giant Antaeus. Like Maleger, Antaeus received constant rejuvenation through contact with his mother, the earth goddess Gaia. Hercules brought his reign of terror to an end by the simple expedient of lifting

⁵⁶ Quoted in Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 146.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 147.



Fig. 3. 'Vile caytive wretches, ragged, rude, deformd, | All threatning death, all in straunge manner armd.' A fifteenth-century vision of the living dead. Jacobus de Voragine, *Légende dorée*

him off the ground and strangling him in mid-air. In the early modern era, no less than today, the idea of drawing strength from the earth itself resonated powerfully with notions of cultural rootedness. Seamus Heaney was not the first to recognize in the meeting of 'Hercules and Antaeus' the confrontation between a cosmopolitan conqueror ('his mind big with golden apples, | his future hung with trophies') and his land-loving indigenous victim:

the cradling dark
the river-veins, the secret gullies
of his strength,
the hatching grounds
of cave and souterrain,
he has bequeathed it all
to elegists.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Heaney, *New Selected Poems*, 76.

Yet while for Heaney the Antaeus myth becomes nostalgic 'pap for the dispossessed', to the English in Elizabethan Ireland, the myth spoke of the conqueror's yearning for a more perfect dispossession. Spenser's contemporary, Sir William Herbert, depicted Irish rebellion as an Antaeus drawing its strength from attachment to traditional 'evil laws and customs'. Herbert's solution was literally to deprive the Irish of contact with their customary earth, transplanting whole communities from one province to another.⁵⁹

If the foes Arthur and Guyon face in these cantos are recognizably Irish, they are also unmistakably dead. Book 2 thus poses the Irish question in a specific and unsettling way, as a problem less of unruly inhabitants than of unquiet ancestors, whose tenacious hold on the land poses a barrier to the establishment of a British identity on Irish soil. The episode framed by the two battles, Arthur and Guyon's sojourn in the Castle of Alma in cantos 9 and 10, underlines how much is at stake in the confrontation with the Irish dead. The Castle, an allegory of the well-regulated human body, is composed of earthy 'slime', and to earth it must return (2.9.21); yet there is ceaseless warfare between the Castle and the earth on which it stands, out of which are spawned the besieging hosts. What hope, then, for a quiet grave? In the Castle's chamber of memory, Arthur is introduced to the volume 'Briton Moniments', which records the history of his own nation, and his personal lineage. Yet Arthur himself remains rootless; the history breaks off abruptly in the reign of his father Uther, 'as if the rest some wicked hand did rend' (2.10.68). Henceforth, Arthur's greatest challenge will be to reforge the link between himself and the British line (past and future), to give himself roots.⁶⁰ The first step towards this goal is the clearing of the soil, through the uprooting of the Irish dead embodied in Maleger.

The problem of what lies beneath the earth of Ireland is acutely and persistently posed in Book 2, but less persuasively resolved. Arthur's pitching of Maleger into a standing lake fails to convince even on its own terms—in time, the body must sink or float to the side, renewing its contact with the earth—and it is far from clear what sort of Irish policy the deed could be intended to represent. Spenser seems less concerned

⁵⁹ Sir William Herbert, *Croftus sive De Hibernia Liber*, ed. and trans. Arthur Keaveney and John A. Madden (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1992), 113; see McCabe, *Monstrous Regiment*, 129–30.

⁶⁰ See Andrew King, 'Lines of Authority: The Genealogical Theme in *The Faerie Queene*', *Spenser Studies*, 18 (2003), 59–77; Schwyzer, *Literature, Nationalism and Memory*, 40–5.

to provide a facile answer than to emphasize the weird, baffling nature of the problem. Not only the allegory but the formal structures of these cantos, marked by uncanny repetition and circularity, underline the paradoxical difficulty involved in trying to shift the dead. Thus, in the concluding couplet of canto 11's stanza 37 (quoted above), the refusal of the reiterated phrase 'dead corse' to budge from its metrical position in the line mirrors the refusal of Maleger's body to fall down. Similarly, the fight with the undead captain in canto 11 recapitulates, with amplification, the battle with the zombies in canto 9. The solution normally favoured by Spenser's heroes ('hewing and slashing', 9.2.15) here leads simply to a restatement of the conundrum ('dead corse').

The graceful yet unequivocal conclusions of *St Erkenwald* and related works of medieval colonial archaeology, in which the indigenous body or relic crumbles peaceably to dust, appear to lie beyond Spenser's grasp in *The Faerie Queene*. While the poem registers in various ways that violence is not a very effective means of dealing with the dead, the renunciation of violence remains, for a mixture of generic and historical reasons, inconceivable. Spenser can never quite relinquish the fantasy that force, of a sufficiently concentrated and overwhelming kind, might yet be sufficient for the job. In Book 5, the Book most explicitly and consistently concerned with Ireland, the brutality with which the various villains are dispatched is often and sometimes shockingly in excess of what is required to terminate a life. The aim seems to be to kill, or at any rate obliterate, the corpse as well. Malengin, a type of the Irish kern, is ground almost to powder by Talus's flail, 'That all his bones, as small as sandy grayle, | He broke, and did his bowels disentrayle' (5.9.19). The fate of the oppressive Souldan, caught in the hooks of his own chariot, is even more extreme:

Torne all to rags, and rent with many a wound,
That no whole peece of him was to be seene
But scattred all about, and strow'd upon the greene.
(5.8.42)

So was this Souldan rapt and all to rent,
That of his shape appear'd no little monument.
(5.8.43)

This is a fantasy of perfect violence, extending beyond the life to annihilate the body and the memory. Curiously, however, Artegall seems subsequently to be worried by the absence of a monument, and constructs one out of the victim's battered shield and armour, causing

them to be 'hung in all mens sight | To be a moniment for evermore' (5.8.45). The split impulse here, to wipe away every trace of the foe but also to preserve a material memorial, can be noted as well in the death of Pollente, whose decapitated corpse is washed down the river but whose head is 'pitcht upon a pole . . . | Where many years it afterwards remaind' (5.2.19). Munera sinks into the mud and her blood is 'washt away' in the stream, but her golden hands and silver feet are similarly 'nayld on high' (5.2.26). Alongside the dark longing to efface the indigenous adversary, utterly and forever, persists the hope that one day their remains might become objects of antiquarian interest and study, that their very bodies might, in a real way, become one's own.⁶¹

In *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, Spenser will at last find the means of evicting the dead from the 'goodly and commodious . . . soil' of Ireland.⁶² Here the slightly wistful archaeological impulses evinced by Artegall in Book 5 are given free rein. It is worth remembering that the *View* was first presented to the world, more than thirty years after Spenser's death, in the guise of an antiquarian treatise, and not without justification.⁶³ The two speakers in the dialogue, though sometimes guiltily aware that they are veering far from the proposed subject of Ireland's *present* state, cannot resist digressing into 'sweet remembrances of antiquities' (43). More often than not Spenser's spokesman, Irenius, is able to demonstrate that accurate knowledge of antiquity, for instance in the matter of racial pedigrees, is anything but irrelevant to an understanding of Ireland's present woes.⁶⁴

An important exchange in the *View* concerns the artificial hills upon which the Irish hold meetings, at which, Irenius complains, seditious plots are laid. Eudoxus counters that such hills, anciently

⁶¹ Of course, the grisly display of the severed body parts of the executed was common practice, both in England and, notably, for the English army in Ireland. But Artegall's careful memorializing of his victims can also be seen to recall, or foreshadow, the Nazi interest in establishing a museum of Jewish culture in Prague. See the discussion in Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and Wonder', in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 173–5.

⁶² Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 11.

⁶³ On the *View* as antiquarian treatise, see Bart van Es, *Spenser's Forms of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 84–94.

⁶⁴ On genealogical strategies in the *View*, see Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser's Irish Experience: Wyld Fruit and Salvage Soyl* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 85–112, and Willy Maley, *Nation, State and Empire in English Renaissance Literature* (Basingstoke Palgrave, 2004), 72–91. Maley's insight that Spenser's main interest is in 'dematerialising' the Irish rather than 'demonising' (85) them is an important one.

called Folkmotes, were designed precisely with such public gatherings in mind. Irenius concurs in praising the Saxon Folkmote, but reminds Eudoxus of the difference in time, place, and people, adding that the artificial hills dotting the Irish landscape are apt to have a different origin:

some were raised, where there had been a great battle, as a memory or trophy thereof; others, as monuments of burials of the carcasses of all those that were slain in any field, upon whom they did throw such round mounts, as memorials of them . . . and other whiles they did throw up many round heaps of earth in a circle, like a garland, or pitch many long stones on end in compass, every one of which (they say), betokened some worthy person of note there slain and buried; for this was their ancient custom, before Christianity came in amongst them that churchyards were enclosed. (80)

The real nature of the gatherings can be judged, Irenius implies, by the real nature of the hills. Where Eudoxus supposed he saw civic-minded Anglo-Saxons meeting at the Folkmote, Irenius recognizes incorrigible Irish rebels clustering on the graves of their ancestors. This insight seems to confirm the suspicion voiced at the opening of the *View*, that the intractability of the Irish problem will be found to 'proceed from the very genius of the soil' (11).

As both an antiquarian and a planter, it is natural for Irenius/Spenser to conceive of the Irish problem in terms of soil management. His own province of Munster has 'the sweetest soil of Ireland', yet there is something sinister lurking in the loam; the English settlers who were first 'planted' there have 'now grown like the Irish' (68). The verbal images Irenius employs in discussing how to deal with the Irish are drawn from the lexicon of weed control—'cutting off' and 'rooting out'.⁶⁵ Towards the end Irenius concedes that genocide is not an acceptable option—'Ireland is full of her own nation, that ought not to be rooted out' (144). None the less, a rooting out of another sort, breaking the ties that bind the Irish to the earth, remains essential to any successful project for the pacification of Ireland.

There is an echo of 'rooting out' in Eudoxus's odd remark, 'This ripping up of ancestors, is very pleasing unto me' (53). 'Ripping up' here carries the primary meaning of revealing or laying bare, and in this sense merely expresses antiquarian enthusiasm. But the phrase also

⁶⁵ See Spenser, *View*, 18, 26, 35, 38, 41, 49, 50, 53, 77, 82, 89, 90, 93, 118, 114. See Eamon Grennan, 'Language and Politics: A Note on Some Metaphors in Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland*', *Spenser Studies*, 3 (1982), 99–110.

calls to mind a pair of disturbing images. 'Ripping up of ancestors' suggests tearing up the genealogical roll or chronicle—precisely what the 'wicked hand' has done to 'Briton Moniments', but in this case to a native Irish document. At the same time, the phrase could be used to describe the action of physically tearing the ancestors from their graves. Taken in either sense, 'ripping up of ancestors' suggests not only the revelation but the destruction of the links between living and the dead.

When Spenser seeks to imagine how the Irish earth could cease to be the province of the Irish dead, his mind turns to images and memories of cannibalism. The two most vivid and disturbing vignettes in the book, both of which are presented as the personal recollections of Irenius, involve the consumption by the Irish of one another. The first instance is said to have occurred at the execution of Murrogh O'Brien in 1577:

I saw an old woman, which was his foster mother, take up his head, whilst he was quartered, and sucked up all the blood that run thereout, saying, that the earth was not worthy to drink it, and therewith also steeped her face and breast, and tore her hair, crying out and shrieking most terribly. (66)

The woman's words remind us that the cannibal is not only one who defies human morality, but one who denies the earth its due. Indeed, cannibalism is a kind of anticipatory exhumation—not a taking, but a keeping, of the body from the earth. In scriptural terms, the act is self-defeating, as it is precisely out of the earth that O'Brien's blood might have cried to God for vengeance. The fact that the drinker is his foster mother prevents us from reading the act as one of reabsorption into a lineage structure. Neither the tomb nor the womb will receive O'Brien; his ending lies in a historical cul-de-sac. Meanwhile, as always in cases of treason, the lands of which he was master would be seized by the crown.

The second recollection of cannibalism is the most well-known, and endlessly haunting, passage in the *View*, Irenius's description of the Munster famine:

ere one year and a half, they were brought to such wretchedness, as that any stony heart would have rued the same. Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them; they looked like anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves; they did eat the dead carrions, happy where they could find them, yea, and one another soon after, insomuch as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves.

The image is chilling, but it is also, within the terms of colonial archaeology, all too perfect. Here at last Spenser fully replicates the

achievement of *St Erkenwald* and its predecessors—the exhumation and final annihilation of the indigenous body, not by means of colonial violence, but before English eyes brimming with sympathetic tears. ‘Any stony heart would have rued the same.’ ‘Meche mournyng and myrthe was mellyd to-geder.’ There is tremendous tension in this passage from the *View*, but it is not, as is sometimes suggested, the tension between horrified sympathy and ruthless pragmatism. Rather, the tension is between horrified sympathy and a vision of Eden—of laying claim to a land where there are, literally, no dead underfoot. Spenser could never rid his mind of what he witnessed in the famine; the remarkable number of images of starvation in *The Faerie Queene* attest to its hold on his imagination.⁶⁶ None the less, when he took possession of his new estates in the wake of the pacification of Munster, it must have been no small comfort to feel that he was planting in clean soil.

In 1598, Tyrone’s rebellion spread south to strike at the heart of the Munster Plantation. Spenser was one of many New English settlers to be expelled from their estates; he would die in London in the first month of 1599. Paradoxically, the year in which the ‘new English’ were all but driven out of Munster can be seen as that in which they finally took possession of the land. An anonymous tract of 1598 presents itself as *A Supplication of the blood of the English most lamentably murdered in Ireland, Cryeng out of the yearth for revenge*.⁶⁷ This may be the first time that the earth of Ireland is heard to speak with an English voice. Spenser himself probably joined in the writing campaign to plead with the queen for intercession. While the authorship of ‘A Brief Note of Ireland’ remains uncertain, the text has both policy prescriptions and key elements of vocabulary in common with the *View*. (‘Should the Irish have been rooted out? That were too bloody a course: and yet their continual rebellious deeds deserve little better.’⁶⁸) The difference is that whereas the speakers in the *View* are a pair of cultured Englishmen discussing Ireland’s affairs at a comfortable distance, the tormented voices in the ‘Brief Note’ belong literally to the Irish underground: ‘Out of the ashes of desolation and wasteness of this your wretched realm of Ireland, vouchsafe most mighty Empress our Dread Sovereign to receive the

⁶⁶ See Gray, ‘The Influence of Spenser’s Irish Experiences’, 423–8.

⁶⁷ ‘“A Supplication of the blood of the English most lamentably murdered in Ireland, Cryeng out of the yearth for revenge” (1598)’, ed. Willy Maley, *Analecta Hibernica*, 36 (1994), 1–90.

⁶⁸ *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, ix. *Spenser’s Prose Works*, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, Variorum Edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1949), 240.

voices of a few most unhappy ghosts.⁶⁹ Here the beleaguered English settlers effectively lay claim to the status of dispossessed indigenous inhabitants. This is not to suggest that Spenser salvaged a perverse victory from defeat. The same note begs the queen to repatriate the settlers if she will not defend them, 'that at least we may die in our country'.⁷⁰ In the end, Ireland both was and was not Spenser's country. What made it finally possible to know it as a homeland was what made it impossible to remain. At the close of his sojourn in Ireland, at the end of the project of possession, Spenser's voice blends ironically and poignantly with Seamus Heaney's in 'The Tollund Man':

lost,
Unhappy and at home.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 236.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 242.

3

Dissolving Images Monastic Ruins in Elizabethan Poetry

SUPPOSING anyone were naive or gauche enough to ask what, in a nutshell, had been the central message of western poetry across the ages, the best answer would probably be, 'Don't trust builders.' Never prefer a villa to a villanelle, or a statue to a stanza. Concrete crumbles, but language lasts. The capacity of a well-crafted poem to outlast the most enduring of built structures (and everything else) was a popular classical *topos*. As Horace vaunted, 'I have completed a memorial more lasting than bronze and higher than the royal grave of the pyramids.'¹ At least partial confirmation of this boast may be found in the countless variations on Horace's theme found in Elizabethan poetry, sonnet sequences in particular. Thus we find Shakespeare swaggering, in sonnet 55, 'Not marble nor the gilded monuments | Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme.' Spenser, likewise, arrogated to his verse alone the power to 'eternize' his beloved (in contrast to that all-too-material name written 'upon the strand').² Samuel Daniel drew his Delia's attention to the pointed contrast between Roman towns 'entombed . . . within themselves' and 'Th'eternal annals of a happy pen'.³ These and countless similar examples of Elizabethan ruin sentiment convey the brash, slightly unwholesome air of an advertising pitch. We almost expect to hear Shakespeare adding, 'or your money back'.

¹ Horace, 'Ode 30', *The Third Book of Horace's Odes*, ed. Gordon Williams (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 149–50. On the 'immortality-of-poetry *topos*', see Anne Janowitz, *England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 20–30; Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp.xxv–xxix.

² Edmund Spenser, 'Sonnet 75', of *Amoretti*, in *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), 575.

³ Samuel Daniel, 'Sonnet 37', in *Poems and A Defence of Ryme*, ed. Arthur Colby Sprague (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), 29.

That the Elizabethans should have been attracted to the theme of ruin is in no way surprising, given that their land was littered with substantial ruined structures. The most prominent of these, of course, were the hundreds of medieval religious houses, whose sudden reduction to ruin was still a matter of living memory. Between 1536 and 1540, the monasteries of England and Wales had sustained not only the loss of their inhabitants but a ferocious assault on their physical fabric. In spite of contemporary warnings that such useful and beautiful buildings should not be 'let fall to ruin and decay', the policy adopted by the chief engineer of the dissolution, Thomas Cromwell, was one of swift and systematic ruination.⁴ While greed for materials—lead roofs, shaped stone—was undoubtedly a strong motive, there was also a conscious, almost spiteful element in the destruction: ruination was the best means of ensuring that there would be no easy return of the old order. As one of Cromwell's agents reported in 1538, 'I pulled down no house thoroughly . . . but so defaced them as they should not lightly be made friaries again.'⁵ By the later Elizabethan era, some former monastic buildings had been converted into stately homes, playhouses, or sheds for cattle, while at least a few had already disappeared entirely. A great many, however, stood abandoned and slowly crumbling in the midst of towns or fields, a painful sight for all but the most fervent iconoclasts.⁶

For the historicist critic, the link between the creation of so many new English ruins and the subsequent burgeoning of the ruin theme

⁴ Thomas Starkey, letter to Henry VIII, June 1536, in Joyce Youngs, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1971), 169.

⁵ Cited in Margaret Aston, 'English Ruins and English History: The Dissolution and the Sense of the Past', in *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon, 1984), 320.

⁶ A recent and acknowledgedly optimistic estimate suggests that 'as many as half of the dissolved houses were put to new uses', which still leaves hundreds of structures left to pillage and neglect; see Maurice Howard, 'Recycling the Monastic Fabric: Beyond the Dissolution', David Gaimster and Roberta Gilchrist (eds.), *The Archaeology of Reformation, 1480–1580*, (Leeds: Maney, 2003), 221. On the fates of former monastic buildings in the later sixteenth century, see also Aston, 'English Ruins and English History'; Nick Doggett, 'The Demolition and Conversion of Former Monastic Buildings in Post-Dissolution Hertfordshire', in Graham Keevill, Mick Aston and Teresa Hall (eds.), *Monastic Archaeology*, (Oxford: Oxbow, 2001), 165–74; Richard K. Morris, 'Monastic Architecture: Destruction and Reconstruction', in Gaimster and Gilchrist (eds.), *Archaeology of Reformation*, 235–51; Iain Soden, 'The Conversion of Former Monastic Buildings to Secular Use: The Case of Coventry', in Gaimster and Gilchrist (eds.), *Archaeology of Reformation*, 280–9. Soden cites the exceptionally poignant case of Coventry's cathedral. Dissolved as a Benedictine institution, the cathedral was vandalized and taken over by pigs and dogs, who were crushed as the building began to collapse on top of them.

in English poetry seems self-evident. Yet the connection is surprisingly difficult to establish. Although the poets often make a point of claiming eyewitness experience of ruins, the ensuing descriptions of defaced bronzes and toppled towers are almost always vague and conventional; their direct sources lie not in the English landscape, but in Horace, Petrarch, and Joachim Du Bellay's *Antiquitez de Rome*. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule, but these generally involve ancient ruins rather than recent ones. Spenser's *Ruines of Time* is one of several poems to muse over the all-but-invisible remains of Roman Verulamium. Neolithic stone circles were also understood to fall within the category of ruins (though of exactly what former glory was hard to say), and attracted some attention: Philip Sidney and Samuel Daniel both pondered the puzzle that is Stonehenge.⁷

The verses with which this chapter is chiefly concerned are thus of a rare type, an exception within the exception to the rule.⁸ As I shall argue, the same pressures that made it almost impossible to write about monastic ruins gave rise to a handful of passages of extraordinary literary richness and ambiguity. These include the anonymous 'Lament for Walsingham', always assumed to the work of an English Catholic, yet shot through with flashes from an oddly Puritanical imagination. A converse case is the well-known episode at the end of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, in which the Blatant Beast is caught in the act of violently dissolving a monastery—here, a poet often characterized as a militant Protestant suddenly sounds like a defender of an old order. Finally, I shall turn to Shakespeare's sonnet 73, with its famously evocative and elusive reference 'Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang'. What links these passages is not a common perspective on monastic ruins, but

⁷ Philip Sidney, 'The 7. Wonders of England', in *Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 149; Daniel's attack on Stonehenge in *Musophilus* is discussed below.

⁸ In addition to the poems discussed in this chapter, there is Donne's reference to the unpleasant noise made 'when winds in our ruined abbeys roar'; see 'Satire 2', in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Penguin, 1986), line 60. There is also a rather obscure epigram by Thomas Bastard: 'Old abbeys who that lives doth not despise, | Which knew their fall & knows they cannot rise? | And I despise the new, because I see | They were, but are not; these will never be. | But wer't not sin, and might I be so bold, | I would desire one new for many old.' Epigram 24, in *Chrestoleros* (London, 1598). Ruined monasteries are also mentioned, as one would expect, in topographical poems such as Thomas Churchyard's *The Worthiness of Wales* and William Vallans, *A Tale of Two Swannes* (1590). See also n. 66. Monastic ruins become much more common in Jacobean poetry and drama, the most well-known case being John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, 5.3.

rather a common fascination with the problems of perspective. Each is an experiment in double vision, exploring how different objects may occupy a single space, and how a reader or viewer may hold conflicting impressions in mind at the same time. Each moreover conveys an experience of instability, in which fixed images of the Reformation dissolve into their opposites.

MAKING THE RUINS FIT: JOHN WEEVER AND SAMUEL DANIEL

Elizabethan poetry is abundantly stocked with ruins. Elizabethan England, similarly, possessed a generous supply of recently ruined edifices. Why then are poetic references to monastic ruins so rare? We might suppose that the poets were wary of touching raw religious nerves or, by lamenting the fall of these buildings, being seen to regret the dissolution. Yet this is almost certainly not the case. While lamenting the end of monasticism might indeed have been controversial, finding fault with the ferocity of the assault on England's architectural heritage was not. A proclamation in the second year of Elizabeth's reign condemned those over-zealous iconoclasts who 'had charge in times past *only* to deface monuments of idolatry and false feigned images in churches and abbeys'.⁹ William Lambarde, shocked by the ruins of Canterbury, did not hesitate to 'pity and lament this general desolation, not only in this Shire, but in all places in the realm', even as he praised God for delivering England from monastic iniquity.¹⁰ If Elizabethan poets held similar views, there was nothing to stop them from expressing them in verse. The chief deterrent to writing about monastic ruins probably had more to do with poetic conventions than with political controversy. For various reasons, monastic ruins could not easily be forced to fit the immortality-of-poetry *topos*, or, more broadly, to do the sorts of things ruins were supposed to do in poetry. The difficulty involved in applying the conventions of ruin to the case of the monasteries is illustrated by the very mixed success of two poets who attempted it, John Weever and Samuel Daniel.

John Weever (1576–1632) had a brief but prolific career as a poet, producing five volumes of satirical and religious verse between 1599

⁹ Printed in John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (London, 1631), 52. Italics mine.

¹⁰ William Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent* (London, 1576), 235–6.

and 1601.¹¹ His claim to fame, however, rests largely on his subsequent achievement as a Caroline antiquary.¹² In his massive, unfinished survey of *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631), Weever set out to transcribe the inscriptions on medieval tombs before they were lost forever. He was particularly concerned with the splendid tombs of noblemen and abbots which, housed in dissolved monasteries, had been left exposed to vandalism and decay. Yet while the ruined monasteries lie at the heart of Weever's antiquarian project, they are also paradoxically disruptive of that project, provoking in the author a degree of horror that threatens to overturn his most basic assumptions. Thus, on the one hand, Weever takes it as axiomatic that a fascination with ruins is part of human nature: 'All men in general are taken with an earnest desire to see ancient great cities; yea and the very tract where such cities were in former times situated, howsoever they be destroyed, laid level with the ground, and their very ruins altogether ruined' (38). Yet his effort to apply this general principle to the specific instance of ruined monasteries is terribly strained:

We desire likewise to behold the mournful ruins of . . . religious houses, although their goodly faire structures bee altogether destroyed, their tombs battered down, and the bodies of their dead cast out of their coffins; for that, that very earth which did sometimes cover the corps of the defunct, puts us in mind of our mortality, and consequently brings us to unfeigned repentance. (41)

It is almost as if Weever had tried, and failed, to sneak this proposition past himself, without being forced to call to mind the horrors proceeding from the dissolution. The general point is all but overwhelmed by the embittered catalogue of acts of desecration.

The difficulty of assimilating the case of the monasteries to the larger theme of ruin is witnessed in the opening chapter of Weever's discourse, 'On Monuments in General'. Here the author endeavours to define and delimit a subject that, like that of Burton's near-contemporary *Anatomy of Melancholy*, threatens to expand to encompass the bulk of human activity:

¹¹ *Epigrammes* (1599); *Faunus and Melliflora, or, The Original of our English Satyres* (1600); *The Whipping of the Satyre* (1601); *The Mirror of Martyrs* (1601); *An Agnus Dei* (1601). Weever's career as a poet about town, and his literary relations, are discussed in E. A. J. Honigmann, *John Weever: A Biography of a Literary Associate of Shakespeare and Jonson, together with a photograph facsimile of Weever's Epigrammes (1599)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

¹² Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 190–216.

A monument is a thing erected, made, or written, for a memorial of some remarkable action, fit to be transferred to future posterities. And thus generally taken, all religious foundations, all sumptuous and magnificent structures, cities, towns, towers, castles, pillars, pyramids, crosses, obelisks, amphitheatres, statues, and the like, as well as tombs and sepulchres, are called monuments. Now above all remembrances (by which men have endeavoured, even in despite of death to give unto their Fame's eternity) for worthiness and continuance, books, or writings, have ever had the pre-eminence.¹³

Whereas the first sentence offers what seems a plausible definition of a monument, the second insists on including almost every kind of built structure within the category. It is notable that monasteries, not usually thought of primarily as memorials to remarkable actions, head the list. The third sentence broadens the category still further, to include texts, but also introduces a hierarchy. Some monuments are more monumental—more effective, that is, at preserving memory—than others. Weever goes on to cite substantial passages from a range of classical (Horace, Martial, Ovid, Lucan) and modern poets, all attesting to the durability of texts in comparison to wayward pyramids and feckless bronzes. Two works by Edmund Spenser, *The Ruines of Rome* (a translation of Du Bellay's *Antiquitez*) and *The Ruines of Time* (on Verulamium) are quoted extensively. Both first published in the *Complaints* volume of 1593, the former can be viewed as the template of late-Elizabethan ruin sentiment, the latter as the culmination.¹⁴ Robust and indefatigable in asserting the immortality of poetry, Spenser provides Weever with the heartening credo that concludes the first chapter of *Ancient Funerall Monuments*:

wise words taught in numbers for to run,
Recorded by the Muses, live for aye;
Ne may with storming showers be washed away,
Ne bitter breathing winds with harmful blast,
Nor age, nor envy, shall them ever waste.¹⁵

While almost all of the verses Weever cites go towards the demonstration of the 'pre-eminence' of texts, at one point the thrust of the

¹³ Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, 1.

¹⁴ See Leonard Barkan, 'Ruins and Visions: Spenser, Pictures, Rome' in Jennifer Klein Morrison and Matthew Greenfield (eds.), *Edmund Spenser: Essays on Culture and Allegory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 9–36; Janowitz, *England's Ruins*, 27–30.

¹⁵ Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, 5; Spenser, *The Ruins of Time*, in *Poetical Works*, lines 402–6.

chapter appears to swerve, briefly but drastically. The deviation occurs just as Weever makes the transition from Roman to English ruins:

We have many examples here in England of the small continuance (as I may so call it) of magnificent strong buildings, by the sudden fall of our religious houses, of which a late nameless versifier hath thus written:

What sacred structures did our elders build,
Wherein religion gorgeously sat decked?
Now all thrown down, religion exiled,
Made brothel-houses, had in base respect,
Or ruined so that to the viewers eye,
In their own ruins they entombed lie:
The marble urns of their so zealous founders
Are digged up, and turn'd to sordid uses;
Their bodies are quite cast out of their bounders
Lie uninterr'd. O greater what abuse is?
Yet in this later age we now live in,
This barbarous act is neither shame nor sin.¹⁶

Introduced simply as an English iteration of the universal theme of ruin, the import and effect of these verses is radically at odds with the others cited in the chapter. Here, ruin does not testify to the fragility of all physical structures in the face of time. Rather, the ugly spectacle of broken buildings bears witness to a specific historical crime, perpetrated in the recent past, and perpetuated in the corrupt present. For such abomination, the durability of texts provides no compensation.

The bitter voice that laments the destruction of the monasteries in these lines is not necessarily that of an English Catholic. The poet avoids attributing any spiritual efficacy to the monastic life of renunciation and prayer, celebrating instead the pious intentions of the founders and their concern to make religion beautiful, whilst decrying the recklessness and inhumanity of the iconoclasts. Such views were not uncommon among High or proto-Laudian Anglicans at the time.¹⁷ Indeed, the likeliest candidate for authorship of the poem that bursts like a small bomb in the middle of Weever's first chapter is Weever himself. The lines are similar enough in style, if not in tone, to his youthful satires. His coy failure to name the versifier is suspiciously unlike his usual

¹⁶ Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, 4.

¹⁷ Parry, *The Trophies of Time*, 204–5.

citational thoroughness.¹⁸ Most tellingly of all, the horrified response to the dissolution, with its distinctive emphasis on the exhumation of bodies and desecration of tombs, matches precisely with the views Weever will go on to express in subsequent chapters.

If the verses on the fate of monasteries are indeed by Weever, they may hold part of the key to the unusual shape of his literary career, drawing both the link and the line between the chirping Elizabethan satirist and the sombre Stuart antiquary. Writing under Elizabeth, Weever had touched on themes relating to the dissolution—poking sly fun at the lives of cloistered nuns, and celebrating the destruction of Becket's shrine at Canterbury—but had made no explicit mention of the ruined monasteries.¹⁹ Whether his obsession with the dissolution had already begun to grow is unknown, as are the motives that led him to abandon poetry at the close of Elizabeth's reign, falling silent for some thirty years. Yet the few lines on the monasteries published in *Ancient Funerall Monuments* are suggestive of the extraordinary difficulty involved in adapting the literary form he had preferred in youth to the theme that preoccupied him in later life. That the poem is in itself a kind of ruin or fragment—two lines short of a sonnet, clotted in syntax, hovering between epigram and jeremiad—is suggestive of the destructive pressure the subject of monastic ruins brought to bear on the Elizabethan poetic conventions Weever had lived by.²⁰ In an ironic inversion of the immortality-of-poetry *topos*, here it is poetic language itself that crumbles in the face of ruin.

Whatever their private feelings may have been—and Weever is unlikely to have been alone in his passionate response—the large majority of Elizabethan poets were content to steer well clear of the subject of what had happened to the monasteries. For a generation of aspiring Horaces, these were simply not the right sort of ruins. Depending on one's point of view, the shattered abbeys might serve as evidence of Henry's greed, Cromwell's ruthlessness, or the providence-provoking lasciviousness of the monks, but they could not easily be

¹⁸ 'In *Funeral Monuments*, where poetry is often quoted . . . , Weever almost always indicated the author's name . . . Sometimes, however, he simply assigned the quotation to an unnamed writer, and some of these verses, especially when Weever described them as 'late' (i.e. recent), have long puzzled me—for one naturally wonders whether they might be his own.' Honigmann, *John Weever*, 64. Honigmann does not discuss the example considered here.

¹⁹ See Weever, *Faunus and Melliflora*, E4r–F1v; *The Mirror of martyrs*, F3r.

²⁰ Technically, the poem consists of two 'Venus and Adonis' stanzas (*ababcc*).

made to illustrate the point that all built structures must inevitably pass away. Nor was contemplation of the dissolution compatible with an easy optimism about the endurance of language. The dissolution had been a textual as well as an architectural disaster, countless irreplaceable manuscripts having been lost in the wanton devastation of the monastic libraries.²¹ It is hardly surprising that the poets turned away from these awkward structures, finding them so obviously and irretrievably at odds with established conventions.

No Elizabethan poet was more determined than Samuel Daniel in his efforts to make the unpromising material of the monasteries conform to the immortality-of-poetry *topos*. Like Weever, Daniel was fascinated by the English past (and, like Weever, would abandon poetry for prose history in the seventeenth century). Yet while Daniel's historical preoccupations drew him inevitably to the subject of the dissolution, his respect for convention compelled him to write of the fall of the monasteries in weirdly ahistorical terms. Thus, in *The Complaint of Rosamond* (1592), Daniel's ghostly heroine recalls how her body was laid to rest at Godstow Abbey:

Where yet as now scarce any note descries
 Unto these times, the memory of me,
 Marble and brass so little lasting be.
 For those walls which the credulous devout,
 And apt-believing ignorant did found:
 With willing zeal that never call'd in doubt,
 That time their works should ever so confound,
 Lie like confused heaps as underground.
 And what their ignorance esteem'd so holy,
 The wiser ages do account as folly.²²

Rosamond goes on, predictably, to thank the poet whose 'favourable lines, | Re-edified the wrack of my decays'. Rhyme has been seen to triumph over ruin, but truth—or at least, historical accuracy—has become a casualty in the process. Daniel avoids any specific mention of

²¹ See C. E. Wright, 'The Dispersal of the Libraries in the Sixteenth Century', in Francis Wormald and C. E. Wright (eds.), *The English Library Before 1700*, (London: Athlone Press, 1958), 148–75; Philip Schwyzer, *Literature, Nationalism and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 2; Jennifer Summit, 'Monuments and Ruins: Spenser and the Problem of the English Library', *ELH* 70 (2003), 1–34.

²² Samuel Daniel, *The Complaint of Rosamond*, in *Poems and A Defence of Ryme*, lines 705–14.

the dissolution of the monasteries, and indeed of the Reformation. The walls of Godstow have fallen victim only to 'time'. While the house's founders are accused of ignorance and credulity, their error seems to have consisted only in believing in the permanence of their edifices. The greater wisdom of Protestants, by contrast, apparently consists simply in the knowledge that no building lasts forever.

In *Rosamond*, Daniel resorts to drastic measures to make monastic ruins emblematic of the power of time. Confessional conflicts are mapped onto the immortality-of-poetry *topos*, and evacuated of any other content. The manoeuvre is repeated in *Musophilus* (1599), where Daniel's mouthpiece accuses such ruins of treachery:

Where will you have your virtuous names safe laid,
In gorgeous tombs, in sacred cells secure?
Do you not see those prostrate heaps betrayed
Your fathers' bones, and could not keep them sure?²³

It must indeed have been difficult to behold the remnants of the monasteries without thinking, in one way or another, of treachery. Henry VIII had executed more than a few recalcitrant monks and unruly abbots for treason; traditionalists in their turn saw the king as a traitor both to his people and his God. Once again, however, Daniel shrugs off the troublesome historical details, transposing the charge of treachery into a debate about the perpetuation of memory.

The glancing reference to the ruined abbeys in *Musophilus* immediately precedes a more extended—and vituperative—confrontation with Stonehenge. The shift from monasteries to megaliths reads like a move to safer, more conventional ground on which to assert the primacy of poetry. What better proof of architecture's inadequacy than 'that huge dumb heap, that cannot tell us how, | Nor what, nor whence it is' (lines 339–40)?²⁴ Yet the anxieties evoked by the brief mention of the monasteries percolate through the Stonehenge passage.²⁵ Once again, the charge brought against the failed monument is that of treason. Stonehenge is 'corrupted', 'a traitor' to its forgotten founders. In

²³ Daniel, *Musophilus*, in *Poems and A Defence of Ryme*, lines 325–30. Further line references in text.

²⁴ Stonehenge had by this time become a conventional example of a failed monument; see John Leland and John Bale, *The Laboryouse Journey and Serche of Johan Leylande, for Englandes Antiquitees* (London, 1549), F7v.

²⁵ See Gregory Kneidel 'Samuel Daniel and Edification', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 44 (2004), 66–8.

this context, the charges of betrayal and 'guile' inevitably recall the well-known tradition that Stonehenge was first erected as a memorial to 'Saxon trecherie'.²⁶ Daniel dismisses the story as a legend, but this only deepens Stonehenge's implication in treason. By failing to perpetuate the true memory of its founders, Stonehenge has opened the door to purveyors of 'fabulous discourse' like Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the chronicles have consequently been stuffed with lies. History has fallen into disrepute, 'That now her truths hardly believed are, | And though sh'avouch the right, she scarce hath right.' Stonehenge thus ends up undermining the very contrast between built structures and poetry that it was meant to demonstrate. The treacherous stones are seen as the wellspring of a cynical scepticism that proves corrosive even to textual memory. It is as if, having forgotten what Stonehenge was for, the English can never trust their memories again. The queasiness of this passage, the sense that there is no longer any solid ground, suggests that the poet had something more in mind than the standing stones on Salisbury plain.

Daniel may be bitter in his denunciation of Stonehenge, but he is not immune to its fascination. The same passage includes a remarkably sensitive description of the activity of ruin-gazing, wherein an imagined traveller confronts the monument with a succession of earnest, awed, and frustrated glances:

Whereon when as the gazing passenger
Hath greedy looked with admiration,
And fain would know his birth, and what he were,
How there erected, and how long ago:
Enquires and asks his fellow traveller
What he hath heard and his opinion:
And he knows nothing. Then he turns again
And looks and sighs and then admires afresh.

(lines 343–50)

This way of looking at a ruin is a world away from the clinical gaze that Daniel and Shakespeare fix on generic ruins in their sonnets ('Delia, these eyes have seen . . .').²⁷ Nor does the traveller's gaze resemble

²⁶ Cf. Spenser: 'Whose dolefull moniments who list to rew, | Th'eternall marks of treason may at Stoneheng vew' (*The Faerie Queene*, 2.10.66).

²⁷ Daniel, 'Sonnet 37', in *Poems and A Defence of Ryme*, 29. Cf. the gaze Shakespeare fixes on ruins in 'Sonnet 64'.

the fixed and helpless stare of Walter Benjamin's angel of history, as detached from as he is anguished by the mounting ruins of time.²⁸ Instead, Daniel records a succession of different glances and gazes, each of them expressive of a complex and divided experience. The viewer seems to oscillate between seeing what is there and seeing what is not. It is the very incompleteness of the monument—the same incompleteness that provokes Musophilus to fury—that precludes the possibility of a total and totalizing response.

Stonehenge is silent—stubbornly, eternally, even treacherously so. Nevertheless, the play of questioning gazes suggests something like a dialogue between the viewer and the monument, two figures situated side by side on Salisbury plain. Stonehenge and the traveller are, we might say, present to one another. While they remain so, the identity of each remains to some extent suspended or in flux. When one 'fain would know his birth, and what he were', it is not entirely clear whether the traveller is questioning Stonehenge's origins or his own, or whether he is in fact being quizzed by the monument. This subtle passage exemplifies the moment at which, in the phrase of the archaeologist Michael Shanks, 'the past looks back'.²⁹ Such a reciprocal gaze or visual dialogue involves suspending not only the primacy of the viewer over the artefact (as subject vs. object of knowledge), but also the archaeologist's own 'self-coherence, command, and confidence' (a loss which, from Shanks's perspective, is wholly salutary).³⁰ The three major poetic treatments of monastic ruin to which I will now turn all share with Daniel's description of Stonehenge a fascination with visual experience. All, moreover, describe a gaze that not only refuses to reduce the ruin to an integrated whole, but which somehow doubles back to split the viewer. In different ways, Spenser, Shakespeare, and the Walsingham poet render the enigmatic moment in which the past looks back.

²⁸ See discussion in Simon Ward, 'Ruins and Poetics in the Works of W. G. Sebald', in J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (eds.), *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 58–71.

²⁹ Michael Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1992), 138. Shanks is one of several contemporary archaeologists to emphasize visuality. On neolithic and modern ways of looking at Stonehenge, see Barbara Bender, *Stonehenge: Making Space* (Oxford: Berg, 1998). See also Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994).

³⁰ Shanks, *Experiencing the Past*, 66.

THE WRACKS OF WALSINGHAM

In Elizabethan times, Walsingham in Norfolk was 'very famous', according to William Camden, 'by reason of the best saffron growing there'.³¹ Before the dissolution, however, Walsingham had possessed a different and greater claim to fame. Among pilgrimage destinations in England, Walsingham Priory was second only to Canterbury.³² Commoners and kings came to lay their humble or opulent offerings at the feet of the wooden image known as Our Lady of Walsingham. Early in his reign, Henry VIII is reported to have walked barefoot to her shrine and offered a magnificent necklace, as he petitioned the Virgin for an heir. Erasmus, who visited Walsingham around 1512, was sharply critical of the gross superstition and ignorance he found there. Yet he was also sensitive to the air of sacred mystery surrounding the shrine, and it is to this effect that Camden quotes 'Erasmus an eye-witness':

The church is fair and neat; yet in it the Virgin dwelleth not. That honour, forsooth, she hath done unto her Son. She hath her church by her self, but so, as that she may be on the right hand of her Son. Neither doth she dwell here . . . In that church . . . there is a small chapel, but all of wood, whereinto on either side at a narrow and little door are such admitted as come with their devotions and offerings. Small light there is in it, and none other in manner but by tapers or wax-candles, yielding a most dainty and pleasant smell. Nay if you look into it, you would say it were the habitation of heavenly saints indeed, so bright shining it is all over with precious stones, with gold and silver.³³

The pilgrim's approach to the Image of Our Lady is gradual, resembling the removal of a series of veils. She dwells not in the Priory church, but in the adjoining shrine; she lies not in the outer part of the shrine, but in the inner chapel. Erasmus's trajectory brings him only as far as the door of the inner chapel, from which he gazes with timid veneration on a vision of heaven itself.

In 1538, the Image of Our Lady was taken to London and burned at Smithfield. The Priory was dissolved and the glittering treasures of the shrine were seized by the crown. Having quoted the report of Erasmus,

³¹ William Camden, *Britain*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1610), 479.

³² On the history of the priory and archaeology of the site, see J. C. Dickinson, *The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956).

³³ Camden, *Britain*, 479.

Camden sums up the after-history of Walsingham Priory in a single sentence: ‘But within the memory of our fathers, when King Henry the Eighth had set his mind and eye both, upon the riches and possessions of churches, all this vanished quite away.’ Camden thus draws a pointed contrast between two kinds of gaze and their effects. Where Erasmus is content to maintain a respectful distance, bearing witness to the sacred mysteries from the threshold, Henry’s gaze penetrates the sanctum in an almost tactile way—and, like the teardrop in *St Erkenwald* or the monk’s hand in the story of Guinevere’s hair, it causes what it touches to disappear.

Naturally, though the monastic community had departed and the heavenly vision vanished, the Priory buildings did not simply melt away. An engraving of the early eighteenth century depicts them in the form they had probably assumed within a few decades of the dissolution, and which they still present today: low huddled ruins, with only the east end of the church standing out starkly against the sky (Fig. 4). Something like this scene was witnessed by the anonymous poet who, towards the close of the sixteenth century, penned the ‘Lament for Our Lady’s Shrine at Walsingham’. A unique and important poem, the ‘Lament’ is among the earliest extended responses in verse to the dissolution of the monasteries; it is also, perhaps, the first poem in English devoted entirely to the description of a ruined structure in a landscape since the Anglo-Saxon ‘The Ruin’. Here it is in full.



Fig. 4. The remains of Walsingham Priory, 1738. From Samuel and Nathaniel Buck, *A collection of Engravings of Castles, Abbeys, and Towns in England and Wales*, vol. ii

In the wracks of Walsingham
Whom should I choose
But the Queen of Walsingham
to be guide to my muse?
Then thou, Prince of Walsingham,
grant me to frame
Bitter plaints to rue thy wrong,
bitter woe for thy name.
Bitter was it so to see
the silly sheep
Murdered by the ravening wolves
while the shepherds did sleep.
Bitter was it, oh, to view
the sacred vine,
Whiles the gardeners played all close,
rooted up by the swine.
Bitter, bitter, oh to behold
the grass to grow
Where the walls of Walsingham
so stately did show.
Such were the works of Walsingham
while she did stand;
Such are the wracks as now do show
Of that holy land.
Level, level with the ground
the towers do lie,
Which with their golden glittering tops
pierced once to the sky.
Where were gates, no gates are now,
the ways unknown
Where the press of peers did pass
while her fame far was blown.
Owls do scrike where the sweetest hymns
lately were sung,
Toads and serpents hold their dens,
where the palmers did throng.
Weep, weep, oh Walsingham,
whose days are nights,
Blessings turned to blasphemies,
holy deeds to despites.
Sin is where Our Lady sat,
Heaven turned is to Hell.

Satan sits where our Lord did sway,
Walsingham, oh, farewell.³⁴

The 'Lament' is structured by rapid and repeated oscillation between two drastically opposing visions: Walsingham as it was and as it is today. On the one hand, glittering towers, sweet hymns, crowds of pilgrims and peers; on the other, wreckage and wilderness, owls and serpents. The regular repetition of 'where' emphasizes the point that these two places—the Priory and the ruin, heaven and hell—occupy a single space. The experience of double vision rendered here is arguably an element of all ruin experience. A ruin is always a dual entity, both a thing in itself and a sign of absence. To look upon a ruin is to look as well upon what is no longer there. As Meric Casaubon observed, 'those visible superviving evidence of antiquities represent unto their minds former times, with as strong an impression, as if they were actually present, and in sight as it were'.³⁵ In some cases, the visions of past and present can be complementary. Monastic ruins today, well tended and set in manicured grounds, are designed to stimulate feelings of contemplative stillness as like as possible to what the visitor imagines to have prevailed in these buildings before their downfalls. Under certain very privileged conditions, it may even be possible to 'see' and inhabit both visions simultaneously. Visiting a friend in an old converted abbey, Henry James thoroughly enjoyed the impression of synchronism:

This entertainment is inexhaustible; for every step you take in such a house confronts you in one way or another with the remote past. You devour the documentary, you inhale the historic. Adjoining the house is a beautiful ruin, part of the walls and windows and bases of the piers of the magnificent church administered by the predecessor of your host, the mitred abbot . . . It is not too much to say that after spending twenty-four hours in a house that is six hundred years old you seem yourself to have lived in it six hundred years . . . The new life and the old have melted together; there is no dividing line.³⁶

For the author of the 'Lament', however, the dividing line is clear and absolute. Walsingham past is everything that Walsingham present is

³⁴ 'A Lament for Our Lady's Shrine at Walsingham', in *Recusant Poets: With a Selection from their Work*, i, ed. Louise Imogen Guiney (London: Sheed & Ward, 1938), 355–6.

³⁵ Meric Casaubon, *A Treatise of Use and Custom* (London, 1638), 97–8.

³⁶ Henry James, 'Abbeys and Castles', in *English Hours*, ed. Alma Louise Lowe (London: Heinemann, 1960), 144–6.

not. The two 'places', occupying a single space, are like a photograph and its own negative image viewed in rapid, spasmodic alteration.

For obvious reasons, the Walsingham poet is always assumed to have been Catholic. Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, who died in the Tower of London in 1595 and was canonized in 1970, is sometimes mentioned as a possible author. Yet while it is a reasonable assumption that no Elizabethan Protestant would have written with quite such desperate vehemence against the Reformation, neither, on the whole, did Elizabethan Catholics. In texts such as Roger Martin's memoir of the church of Long Melford or the anonymous *Rites of Durham* (1593), old men who had witnessed the stripping of the altars recalled the ornaments and customs of the traditional religion with loving and exact fondness.³⁷ But these authors devote surprisingly little space to denouncing iconoclasm or lamenting the disaster that overtook their beloved buildings. This is probably not so much because they feared censure, but because, for those with genuine memories of Catholic worship, the nature and extent of the loss was self-evident. Thus, the *Rites* records in simple terms and without overly emotive language how St Cuthbert's tomb was pulled down after the suppression of Durham Abbey, how Dean Horne seized the lead and ornaments for his own use, how the beautifully painted stone image of Cuthbert was tucked away by the cloister wall, and how Dean Whittingham later had that image 'defaced & broken all in pieces'.³⁸ There is no need here for a supporting cast of owls and serpents to point up the sense of loss. Read alongside these poignant, understated memoirs, the idealized 'golden glittering tops' and gothic nocturnal shrieks of the 'Lament' strike a false note, both devotionally and poetically.

The easiest explanation for what may seem forced or inauthentic in the Walsingham poem is that its author was too young to remember life before the Reformation, or even perhaps before the reign of Elizabeth. (This would accord with the life dates of Philip Howard, born in 1557.) Even so, there are passages in the 'Lament' that simply do not sound

³⁷ Roger Martin, 'The State of Melford Church and our Ladie's Chappel at the East End, as I did know it', in *The Spoil of Melford Church: The Reformation in a Suffolk Parish*, ed. David Dymond and Clive Paine (Ipswich: Salient Press, 1992). *Rites of Durham: being a description or brief declaration of all the ancient monuments, rites, and customs belonging or being within the monastical Church of Durham, before the suppression, written 1593*, ed. J. T. Fowler (Durham: Surtees Society, 1903). On Martin see also Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 37–40.

³⁸ *Rites of Durham*, 68–9.

like the product of a Catholic imagination. For instance, the description of magnificent structures reduced to ruins haunted by owls and other beasts seems like a recollection of the prophecy of Isaiah against Babylon:

It shall never be more inhabited, neither shall there be any more dwelling there, from generation to generation. The Arabians shall make no more tents there, neither shall the shepherds make their folds there any more. But wild beasts shall lie there, & the houses shall be full of great owls. Estriches shall dwell there, & apes shall dance there. The little owls shall cry in the palaces, one after another, & dragons shall be in the pleasant parlours. And as for Babylon's time it is at hand, and her days may not be long absent. (Isaiah 13: 20–2)³⁹

At the time, this passage would have had a powerfully Protestant and specifically anti-Romanist resonance; like other scriptural references to Babylon, Isaiah's prophecy was understood to refer to the pride and coming fall of the papacy.⁴⁰ There is something distinctly odd about a Roman Catholic invoking the fall of Babylon in a poem about the effects of the Reformation. Similarly, the reference to 'golden, glittering tops' piercing the sky sounds much more like a Protestant trope for spiritual pride than a Catholic recollection of monastic humility. The poet could almost be suspected of cribbing from Spenser's description of the diabolical House of Pride in *The Faerie Queene*:

Whose wals were high, but nothing strong, nor thick,
And golden foile all over them displaid,
That purest skye with brightnesse they dismaid:
High lifted up were many loftie towres . . .

(1.4.4)⁴¹

No less eyebrow-raising is the concluding complaint that 'Satan sits where our Lord did sway'. Like Babylon, the name of 'Satan' resonates with a militant Protestant vocabulary; the name was frequently used to

³⁹ *Biblia: The Bible*, trans. Miles Coverdale (Southwark?, 1535). The catalogue of beasts varies greatly between early translations, though the presence of owls is almost invariable. For Rose Macaulay, Isaiah's prophetic diatribes against Babylon and other enemy cities are the first examples of ruin poetry. *The Pleasure of Ruins* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1953), 1–2.

⁴⁰ See e.g. William Fulke, *A sermon preached at Hampton Court . . . Wherein is plainly proued Babylon to be Rome* (London, 1570).

⁴¹ As a match for the 'press of peers' in the 'Lament', the House of Pride boasts 'a noble of crew | Of Lordes and Ladies . . . on every side'. Behind its arrogant facade, it is 'ruinous and old' (1.4.5). The point is not that the Walsingham poet had read Spenser, or vice versa, but that they are working from the same stock of images, albeit to different ends.

connote the devil in his specific aspect as seducer of witches and master of Catholic idolaters.⁴² Finally, the mention of 'gardeners' ('gardeners' in the original text) colluding in the destruction of the sacred vine invites attention. This looks very much like a reference to Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester under Henry VIII. Although criticism of Gardiner would be apt in this case—in spite of his religious conservatism and opposition to Cromwell, he failed to take a strong stand against the dissolution—it is much more common to find Gardiner reviled, sometimes with the same irresistible pun, as a persecutor of Protestants.⁴³

There might be various biographical explanations for the prevalence of Protestant language and imagery in the 'Lament'. Perhaps the poet was a recent convert to the old religion, and the poem reflects an effort to assemble a Catholic sensibility, using the linguistic and figurative tools derived from a Protestant upbringing. (Again, this would accord with the life history of the Earl of Arundel, who converted in his twenties.) Alternatively, the poet may have been a thorough-going Protestant who sought for one reason or another to imagine or feign a Catholic standpoint. It is intriguing to imagine an agent in the service of the *other* Walsingham (i.e. Sir Francis, Elizabeth's spy-master) cooking up the 'Lament' for use in some scheme of entrapment. One or another of these hypotheses would help explain the peculiar awkwardness at the very outset of the poem. The author clearly knows that the figure of Mary should be of paramount importance to him, but seems to have trouble understanding how or why. Intended as gallantry, the invitation to the Queen of Walsingham to serve as a kind of assistant muse feels simply callow.

What we can say with certainty is that the 'Lament' presents a curious mingling of confessional discourses. It might best be described as a Catholic polemic pursued in an intermittently Protestant register. Whatever biographical factors might lie behind this effect, it deepens further the experience of double vision induced by the spectacle of ruin. With mingled resignation and defiance, the poem seems to acknowledge

⁴² See e.g. *A comyssion sent to the bloody butcher byshop of London and to al covents of frers, by the high and mighty prince, lord, Sathanas the devill of hell* (London, 1557); I. L., *The birth, purpose, and mortall wound of the Romish holie League Describing in a mappe the envie of Sathans shavelings, and the follie of their wisdome, through the Almightyes providence* (London, 1589). Catholic writers in the period did occasionally refer to 'Satan', but far more commonly to 'the devil'. I owe this observation to Charles McKean.

⁴³ See e.g. *A Ballad of Anne Askew* (London, 1624), wherein Askew's body is compared to a garden abused by 'this proud Gardner'.

that the present can only speak itself in a Protestant voice, though its message may not be one Protestants will be glad to hear. Rather than struggling to extricate itself entirely from the language and mindset of the dominant discourse, the 'Lament' subtly ironizes them, illustrating that the very slurs reformers like to fling at Rome—ruined Babylon, haunt of Satan—can be turned back to describe what reform has done to England.

For at least some Elizabethans, the spectacle of monastic ruins seems to have made nonsense of efforts to order the world around the conflict between Protestants and Catholics. The Walsingham poet might have found a kindred spirit in Michael Sherbrook, author of *The Fall of Religious Houses* (C.1591). Born on the eve of the dissolution, Sherbrook had no personal memories of the monasteries before the dissolution, though he could recall seeing a bell still hanging in the tower of Roche Abbey in Yorkshire a year after it was suppressed. That Sherbrook was a priest of the Church of England did not prevent him from idealizing monastic life as enthusiastically as the Walsingham poet. It also did not prevent him from achieving a remarkable sense of detachment from confessional allegiances: 'such tossing there was about religion: that one hanged for papistry, as they term it; and mean the old religion; and another burned for heresy, as they call it; I mean the new religion.'⁴⁴ What aroused Sherbrook's contempt most of all was the shifting of allegiances with the prevailing wind:

even such persons were content to spoil them [the abbeys], that seemed not two days before to allow their religion, and do great worship and reverence at their matins, masses and other service, and other their doings: which is a strange thing to way [weigh]; that they that could this day think it to be the house of God, and the next day the house of the Devil: or else they would not have been so ready to have spoiled it.⁴⁵

One day the house of God, the next the house of the Devil. 'Satan sits where our Lord did sway.' In the 'Lament', the phrase seems, at least on first reading, to describe an actual drastic change in the spiritual status of the priory buildings. For Sherbrook, the shift exists only in the wavering minds of the worshippers-turned-spoilers.

It is perfectly possible that the Walsingham poet was indeed Philip Howard or someone like him, a recent convert reacting against—and

⁴⁴ Michael Sherbrook, 'The Fall of Religious Houses', in *Tudor Treatises*, ed. A. G. Dickens, YAS Rec. Ser. 125 (Wakefield, 1959), 121.

⁴⁵ *ibid.* 125.

also with—the Protestant mentality he had grown up with.⁴⁶ Read this way, the ruined priory becomes the site at which the writer embraces a new identity. The ‘Lament’ is a way of demonstrating to himself and to others that he really has crossed the line, that he is now one of those very people he was raised to regard as tools of Satan. Yet it is equally conceivable that the poet was someone like Michael Sherbrook, an otherwise conventional Protestant who, confronted with the wreck of the monasteries, concluded that no confessional conflict could be so important as to justify this abomination. Read this way, the ruined priory becomes the site where the writer temporarily sheds or transcends an established identity. There seem to have been some Elizabethans who valued the ruins in their midst for precisely this reason—in gazing on a shattered abbey, they might leave behind or suspend the allegiances which structured and straitened all social and private life. As I shall argue in the next section, such moments of unmooring could appeal even to such an apparently rigid exponent of the faith as Edmund Spenser.

‘CONFOUNDED AND DISORDERED’: SPENSER’S BEAST IN THE MONASTERY

In the final canto of Book 6 of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Sir Calidore is closing in at last on his elusive quarry, the Blatant Beast. Armed with a thousand tongues and a poisonous bite, the Beast represents the baneful power of slander and treacherous speech. Having pursued him through the court, city, and countryside, and through all three social estates, Calidore at last finds the Beast in the unlikeliest place, and doing the unlikeliest thing, that could be expected of a Spenserian monster:

The Elfin Knight,
Who now no place besides unsought had left,
At length into a Monastere did light,
Where he him found despoyling all with maine & might.
Into their cloysters now he broken had,
Through which the Monckes he chaced here & there.
And them pursu’d into their dortours sad,
And searched all their cels and secrets neare;
In which what filth and ordure did appeare,
Were yrkesome to report; yet that foule Beast

⁴⁶ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Philip Howard.

Nought sparing them, the more did tosse and teare,
 And ransacke all their dennes from most to least,
 Regarding nought religion, nor their holy heast.
 From thence into the sacred Church he broke,
 And robd the Chancell, and the deskes downe threw,
 And Altars fouled, and blasphemy spoke,
 And th'Images for all their goodly hew,
 Did cast to ground, whilst none was them to rew;
 So all confounded and disordered there.

(6.12.23–5)

If 'A Lament for Our Lady's Shrine at Walsingham' surprises us with unexpected Protestant overtones in what should be a resolutely Catholic context, the last exploit of the Blatant Beast presents the converse case. Although the passage contains elements of satire on monastic corruption, it also clearly solicits the reader's condemnation of the Beast's deeds—deeds that unmistakably recall the dissolution of the English monasteries. There is very little in the preceding seventy-one cantos of *The Faerie Queene* to prepare us for what looks on the surface like a sudden wavering in allegiance to the historical Reformation. The episode is particularly surprising given that the poem's pervasive anti-Romanism typically bears a specifically anti-monastic inflection. For Spenser, the archetypal figure for Catholic menace and iniquity was not, say, the undercover Jesuit or the recusant conspirator, but the seemingly pious monk.⁴⁷ The first and paramount example of this type is the subtle foe Archimago, who dwells in a humble cell and hides his villainy beneath the 'long black weedes' (1.1.29) of a Dominican friar. The vices of monastic life are further exemplified in the untaught and unchaste Abessa (1.3.10–25), whose mother is Corceca (blind superstition) and whose lover is Kirkrapine (church-robbery).

The Blatant Beast's assault on the monastery at the end of Book 6 is in fact often discussed in conjunction with the description of Kirkrapine near the beginning of Book 1 as passages that appear to bear directly on Reformation-era iconoclasm and the dissolution of the monasteries. Like the Beast, Kirkrapine is a plunderer of sacred buildings: 'a stout and sturdie thiefe, | Wont to robbe Churches of their ornaments | And poore mens boxes of their due reliefe.' Also given to disrobing venerated images and filching priestly vestments, Kirkrapine looks oddly like one

⁴⁷ John N. King, *Spenser's Poetry and the Reformation Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 47–58.

of Cromwell's commissioners, or their Edwardian successors. This figure has indeed been read as an indictment of Reformation-era iconoclasm.⁴⁸ Yet, as his intimacy with Abessa suggests, Kirkrapine can also be seen to represent the corruption and rapacity of the medieval church, and notably of the monastic orders, which were accused of preying upon rather than relieving the commons. Initially, then, Kirkrapine presents the reader with a bewildering double image: he looks like a sordid Catholic abbot, and equally like a brutal Protestant iconoclast. Yet the image soon sheds its apparent ambiguity. When Una's tame lion, a figure for Tudor government, pounces on Kirkrapine and rends him to pieces, the crown is vindicated as the punisher, rather than the perpetrator, of crimes against the church. What looked at first like a criticism of the dissolution turns out to be a justification for it. Provoking readerly doubts only to assuage them, the passage is typically Spenserian in making an initial error the basis of an educative experience. The double image resolves into a unified didactic emblem of the righteousness of Reformation.

The Blatant Beast's assault on the monastery presents a different and more complex problem. The passage in Book 6 is at once more inescapably critical of the dissolution and more irreducibly double in its vision of that event. This particular type of ambiguity is not commonly encountered elsewhere in *The Faerie Queene*, if it can be found at all. It is altogether distinct from the ambivalence aroused by the destruction of such beautiful built environments as the Bower of Bliss (2.12) or the House of Busirane (3.11–12). There, the poem lingers over and seems almost to celebrate the alluring artistry of the edifices, before subjecting them to ruthless and righteous despoliation. By contrast, there is nothing even momentarily seductive about the monastery in Book 6—we are immediately notified of its 'filth and ordure'—and, more importantly, there is nothing remotely righteous about the Beast. In this case, it would appear, evil is undone by equal or greater evil. The same could be said of earlier, essentially comic episodes in *The Faerie Queene*, as when Archimago is overthrown by the Saracen Sansloy (1.3), or Malbecco is cuckolded by Hellenore (3.10). Rather than viewing the clash of sinners with ironic detachment, however,

⁴⁸ Mary Robert Falls, 'Spenser's Kirkrapine and the Elizabethans', *Studies in Philology*, 50 (1953), 457–75. See also King, *Spenser's Poetry and the Reformation Tradition*, 55–6; Maryclaire Moroney, 'Spenser's Dissolution: Monasticism and Ruins in *The Faerie Queene* and *The View of the Present State of Ireland*', *Spenser Studies*, 12 (1991), 117–19.

the monastery episode demands an oscillating identification with both. Like the 'Lament for our Lady's Shrine at Walsingham', this passage examines the scene of desolation from two radically dissimilar points of view, one enthusiastically Protestant, the other implicitly Catholic or at least traditionalist. Yet whereas in the 'Lament' the two perspectives are blended in strange harmony, here they are directly and bitterly at odds.

The description of the despoliation of the monastery commences in a satirical tone that seems to solicit approval of the Beast's activities from a Protestant-iconoclastic perspective. The discomfiture of the monks being 'chaced here & there' is comical, and the revelation of 'filth and ordure' hidden in monastic cells is hardly a surprise. The fact that the Beast too is described as 'foul' does not in itself detract from its apparent role as a tool of godly reform. Yet by the final line of the stanza, 'Regarding nought religion, nor their holy heast', the satirical anti-Catholic perspective has all but foundered. A reform-minded reader, having up to this point delighted in the monastic mayhem, might well object that the Beast had no call to regard 'religion' in this case, as it had long since fled monastic confines. It is just possible, perhaps, to read 'religion' as ironic shorthand for 'idolatry upheld in true religion's place', and thus to cling to the Beast's role as righteous scourge for one line further, but the succeeding stanza, in which the Beast turns his attentions to the 'sacred Church', disallows this possibility entirely.

Some readers, seeking to reconcile the anti-monastic satire of stanza 24 with the apparent anti-iconoclasm of stanza 25 have concluded that the Beast stands here for the dangers of excessive or unrestrained iconoclasm.⁴⁹ This appears to have been the opinion of Ben Jonson, who informed William Drummond that 'by the Blatant Beast the Puritans were understood'.⁵⁰ In common with later critics, Jonson seems to have understood the passage dialectically, as staging a confrontation between the extremes of tradition and iconoclasm, culminating at least implicitly in a call for an Elizabethan middle way. In his gauging of Spenser's mature religious sympathies, Jonson may not have been far from the truth. Spenser's scorn for Puritan aesthetic scruples, as well as his horror of ruins, come through clearly in *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, where the English authorities are called upon to:

⁴⁹ See Kenneth Gross, *Spenserian Poetics: Idolatry, Iconoclasm, and Magic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 224–34; King, *Spenser's Poetry and the Reformation Tradition*, 56, 108–9.

⁵⁰ *Ben Jonson*, i, ed. C.H. Hereford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 137.

build up and repair all the ruined churches, whereof the most part lie even with the ground, and some that have been lately repaired are so unhandsomely patched, and thatched, that men do even shun the places for the uncomeliness thereof. Therefore I would wish that there were order taken to have them built in some better form, according to the churches of England; for the outward show (assure your self) doth greatly draw the rude people to the reverencing and frequenting thereof. What ever some of our late too nice fools say, there is nothing in the seemly form, and comely order of the Church.⁵¹

Yet revealing as this passage may be of Spenser's views on worship and church architecture—at least in the Irish context—it cannot be said to hold the key to the monastery episode in *The Faerie Queene*. Whatever Spenser's opinion of those 'too nice fools' who advocated a general assault on church ornaments, he did not represent them in the Blatant Beast. For the Beast to smash windows or defile tombs would indeed identify him as Puritan. But his assaults on the church interior are in fact both targeted and, by sixteenth-century Protestant standards, impeccably moderate. What happens to the church in this passage is only what had taken place in thousands of churches across England, Wales, and Ireland: the expulsion of idolatrous images, the destruction or defacement of the altar to make way for the new communion table, the removal from the chancel of furnishings like the rood screen and prayer desks so as to create an open space for common worship. Far from going to Puritanical extremes, the Beast confines himself to the very kinds of alterations stipulated by the Injunctions of 1559, doing no more than the minimum necessary to have the church 'built in some better form, according to the churches of England'.

If the Beast's attitudes regarding ornament and the disposition of sacred space are those of a mainstream Elizabethan Protestant, those of the narrator apparently are not. The tone, especially in the opening lines of this stanza, is no longer that of a monk-baiting satirist, but rather of one bearing witness to sacrilege. 'From thence into the sacred Church he broke, | And robd the Chancell, and the desks downe threw, | And Altars fouled, and blasphemy spoke . . .' The catalogue of desecrations, delivered without histrionics but with a real sense of the enormity of each successive violation, could be lifted from *The Rites of Durham* or Martin's memoir of Long Melford. The charge of 'blasphemy', above all, suggests a deeply traditionalist, indeed essentially Catholic point of view.

⁵¹ Edmund Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland*, ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 155.

If the Beast's words on this occasion bear any relation to his deeds—if, for instance, he derides an image of the Virgin as a deceitful whore and the altar as Satan's table—then they are blasphemous only from a perspective that acknowledges the sanctity of images and altars. Yet almost immediately after the mention of 'blasphemy', the perspective shifts again. When the Beast turns his destructive attention to the images, the sneering phrase 'for all their goodly hew' marks a brief resurgence of the Protestant satirist whose voice predominated in the preceding stanza. The passage thus veers erratically from one perspective to another, and back again.

Clearly, then, the monastery episode does not stage a clash between extreme Puritan and Catholic perspectives in order to induce a moderate synthesis. The Elizabethan 'middle way' cannot emerge as a resolution to the clash of ideologies since it is already embodied in one of the antagonists (the Beast). Between the two perspectives embodied here—one that affirms the spiritual necessity of what was done to the monasteries and to church interiors, and one that sees only sacrilege, blasphemy, and waste—there is no possible compromise. If there is a moment where the antithetical visions merge in a unified perspective, it is only in the despairing phrase, 'So all confounded and disordered there'—a line eloquently descriptive of the passage it concludes, as well as of the state of the desecrated church.

It seems astonishing, to say the least, that in the final canto of the last completed book of *The Faerie Queene*, a Catholic voice is heard to speak without rebuttal or containment. Was Spenser at last giving vent, perhaps unconsciously, to long-repressed traditionalist yearnings? This is one plausible reading of the monastery episode, but not the only one. Someone wishing to hold fast to the image of Spenser as didactic Protestant poet could argue instead that these stanzas signal the moment at which he entrusts interpretative responsibility to the reader. Fashioned and reformed by *The Faerie Queene*, that reader now is or ought to be equipped to stand alone against the seductions of the Roman whore—among the greatest of which is nostalgia. Like the escape of the Blatant Beast from captivity later in the same canto, the monastery episode can thus be read as a reminder that while epics may end, the daily struggle against evil does not.

Yet I am more inclined to think that this ambiguous episode is not primarily concerned with confessional conflicts at all. Although the irreconcilable perspectives may be nominated as Protestant and Catholic, the deeper investment seems to lie in irreconcilability itself, in the

unresolved duality of perspective. The ruined monastery serves for the poet and his audience as an emblem of ambiguity. At the very moment he might be expected to be tying up the last loose ends, he invokes the ruin to testify to the possibility of ongoing irreducible double vision.⁵² The passage can thus be read as a sly protest against the demand that poetry offer fixed, finite, and politically welcome meanings—against the very pressure Spenser acknowledges in the concluding stanza with his ironic advice to his own verse to ‘keep better measure, | And seeke to please’. For Spenser, the ruined monastery is both symbol and repository of the kind of ambiguity that will not let itself be tidied away, the ambiguity that lies, arguably, at the heart of poetic freedom. Later generations would find peace and pleasure in the shattered remnants of the religious houses. The Elizabethans, by contrast, discovered ugliness, anguish, shame—and, in some cases, liberation.

BARE RUINED CHOIRS: SHAKESPEARE AND THE MONASTERIES

In 1538, the Dominican monastery known as the London Blackfriars was dissolved, the extensive buildings and grounds being parcelled out among the friends and cronies of the crown. The largest share of the site was eventually awarded to Sir Thomas Cawarden, who held the post of Master of the Revels successively under Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth. Cawarden promptly demolished the church to provide building materials for apartment blocks. Some rooms on the western range of the cloisters were used for Revels purposes, including the rehearsal of pageants and the storage of costumes and tents. Cawarden died in 1559, but the revels in the friary were not ended. Blackfriars’ legal status as a Liberty within the walls of London, exempt from the jurisdiction of the anti-theatrical civic authorities, made it a tempting site for impresarios. A company of child actors, with John Lyly as their principal playwright, performed there between 1576 and 1584. In 1596 James Burbage purchased most of the western range and built a new theatre, with the intent of using it for performances by the Chamberlain’s Men. In the event, owing to local objections to adult actors, Blackfriars

⁵² A comparison can perhaps be made between the monastery episode at the end of Book 6—the last Book of the 1596 edition of *The Faerie Queene*—and the image of hermaphroditism that concludes Book 3 in the 1590 edition.

was leased for some further years to children's companies, before finally coming into the hands of Shakespeare's company (now the King's Men) in 1608.⁵³

In 1613, on the eve of retirement from London and professional life, Shakespeare purchased a dwelling of his own in the old Blackfriars gatehouse. There is intriguing evidence from both before and after the period of Shakespeare's ownership of the building having been used for secret Catholic meetings.⁵⁴ Whether or not Shakespeare was a crypto-Catholic who acquired the Blackfriars house as a bolthole for hunted priests, he seems to have wished to preserve a connection with this former monastic site. Did he feel any disquiet over his role in maintaining a house of players in what had been a house of prayer? It is tempting to see a reflection on the after-history of Blackfriars in the Puritan Angelo's provocative question, in *Measure for Measure* (written before Shakespeare's company took up residence), 'Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary and pitch our evils there?' It is conceivable that for the playwright these lines had an ironic private meaning. Nowhere in his work does Shakespeare make explicit reference to the dissolution. Twice, however, in the early tragedy *Titus Andronicus* and in sonnet 73, he conjures before the inner eye the image of a ruined monastery. Both passages are highly ambiguous, but the ambiguity does not belong to the description of the monastery itself so much as to the dramatic or formal circumstances in which they are embedded. Neither passage is capable of telling us what Shakespeare himself thought about the downfall of the monasteries. What they do indicate is that he was able to recognize and exploit the ruined monastery as a culturally intelligible emblem of ambiguity.

The most explicit reference to a monastic ruin in Shakespeare's works occurs in what seems the least plausible of contexts. In *Titus Andronicus*, as Lucius leads an army of Goths towards Rome to wreak vengeance on the Emperor, one of his soldiers brings him a report: 'Renowned Lucius, from our troops I strayed | To gaze upon a ruined monastery . . .'

⁵³ See Irwin Smith, *Shakespeare's Blackfriars Playhouse: Its History and Its Design* (New York: New York University Press, 1964). The parcelling out and increasing commercialization of the former Blackfriars buildings is comparable to the fate of other London Houses: see John Schofield, 'Building in Religious Precincts in London at the Dissolution and After', in Roberta Gilchrist and Harold Mytum (eds) *Advances in Monastic Archaeology*, BAR British Series 227 (Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1993), 29–41.

⁵⁴ See Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion and Resistance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 258–66.

(5.1.20–1). The presence of any sort of monastery—let alone a ruined one—on the outskirts of Rome in the second or third century AD is of course flatly impossible. Up to this point, Shakespeare has depicted a robustly pagan society, in which Titus and his family direct their pleas for vengeance to Jove, Apollo, and Mars. There are, to be sure, hints later in the same scene that Lucius is a Christian or at any rate a monotheist (5.1.74–86), and there may be some sense in which the arrival of a Teutonic army to cleanse Rome of corruption is meant to presage the Reformation.⁵⁵ Yet even if we accept the tenuous link between Lucius and Luther, it is far from clear how the ruined monastery contributes to the Reformation allegory, since both its foundation and dissolution long precede the arrival of the Goths.

The Gothic soldier himself does not react to the ruined monastery in a way that is obviously either pagan or Christian, Protestant or Catholic. His response has more in common with that of a tourist in a strange country, or Daniel's passenger on Salisbury Plain: he *looks*. 'I earnestly did fix mine eye | Upon the wasted building . . .' (5.1.22–3). The unwavering fixity of the Goth's gaze suggests that he expects the edifice to reward his scrutiny with a clear and unambiguous message. Presumably, like Joachim Du Bellay and many another northern traveller in Italy, he looks to the ruins of Rome for a reminder of the transience of worldly achievements. The lesson the Goths hope to teach the Roman empire is already written, as it were, in the crumbling masonry: pride must have a downfall, no earthly sway is sure. Yet the ruin in question declines to deliver up the expected moral. Instead of echoes of departed glory, the Goth hears a baby crying. The spectacle that meets his eyes behind a crumbling monastic wall is as unanticipated as it is ambiguous: Aaron the Moor, with a newborn infant cradled in his arms.

What, when the Goth hauls Aaron on to the stage, does the audience see? They see the tormentor of the virtuous Andronici, a trickster, murderer, sadist, and atheist, a cartoonish caricature of unmitigated depravity. At the same time they behold a loving parent, for whom no sacrifice is too great to save the life of his son. This is not, I think to say that Aaron is a complex character, or that his personality changes following the birth of his child. It would be more true to call him the physical embodiment of an irreconcilable contradiction. It is as if two quite distinct and equally two-dimensional characters—the doting

⁵⁵ See Jonathan Bate, 'Introduction', *Titus Andronicus* (London: Arden, 1995), 19–21.

father and the smirking psychopath—inhabit the same corporeal space. Each speaks in a manner appropriate to his personality, the father earnest and affecting in pleading for the life of his son ('Lucius, save the child' (5.1.53)), the villain revelling as much in his rhetorical figures as in his recollections of mischief accomplished ('I have done a thousand dreadful things | As willingly as one would kill a fly, | And nothing grieves me heartily indeed | But that I cannot do ten thousand more' (5.1.141–4)). The challenge for the audience is not to reconcile these two halves of his personality, but simply to hold these two understandings in mind simultaneously, to maintain, in other words, a kind of double vision whenever Aaron is on stage.

It is appropriate that Aaron should be discovered within a ruined monastery because he is, in a special sense, like a ruined monastery. His stage presence invites the same sort of double or bifurcated vision. The (mental) image of ruin thus serves as a visual prompt, preparing the eyes to apprehend the ambiguous spectacle that lurks behind the wall. The ruin offers itself as an emblem for the play's most memorable character, and perhaps for the play as a whole, which consistently provides in place of the expected moral truths images of irreducible ambiguity. This, indeed, is precisely how *Titus* was seen by its Restoration reviser, Edward Ravenscroft, who excused his extensive rewriting by observing that 'tis the most incorrect and indigested piece in all his works; it seems rather a heap of rubbish than a structure. However as if some great building had been design'd, in the removal we found many large and square stones both useful and ornamental to the fabric, as new modell'd.'⁵⁶ As in a ruin (or a cubist painting), the play's 'useful and ornamental' passages refuse to be aligned in a clear and unified perspective.

There is something blunt, if not inept, about the introduction of the ruined monastery into the pagan Roman landscape of *Titus Andronicus*. It is as if Shakespeare, having hit upon the notion that such a ruin could symbolize and evoke the disruption of unified perspective, simply wheeled one out on to the set. There is no such clumsiness in the second instance in which Shakespeare introduces a ruined monastery into his scene. In the first quatrain of sonnet 73, the spectre of a skeletal abbey

⁵⁶ Edward Ravenscroft, *Titus Andronicus, Or The Rape of Lavinia* (London, 1687), A2r. The instability of Aaron's character and the salvation of the mixed-race child were part of the 'rubbish' Ravenscroft was anxious to tidy away; in his version, the infant is stabbed to death on stage by its mother, whereupon Aaron roars 'Give it me—I'll eat it' (55).

church seems simply to materialize out of the mists of an autumnal woodland.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold
Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

Although the reader does not 'see' the ruin until line 4, it seems then to have been there all along, at once implicit in and concealed behind the quivering bare branches. So startling and so memorable is the effect achieved in this quatrain that the phrase 'bare ruined choirs' has become a kind of shorthand for the fate of the religious houses⁵⁷—in spite of the fact that the actual reference is so tenuous that some readers dispute whether there is an abbey there at all.⁵⁸

As so often, Shakespeare's own religious politics remain curiously hard to grasp, even in those moments where his language becomes saturated in the bitterest of Reformation controversies.⁵⁹ What can be said is that the fourth line of the sonnet is full of echoes of traditionalist protests against the dissolution by the likes of Michael Sherbrook and the Walsingham poet. Even the initial adjective 'bare', in addition to suggesting rooflessness (and, in relation to the boughs of line 3, leaflessness) carries a quiet reminder of the stripping of the altars. Sherbrook's horrified account of the despoliation of Roche Abbey—stripped in a matter of hours not only of idolatrous ornaments but of anything remotely saleable, down to the hooks in the walls—gives a sense of how grotesquely 'bare' these ruins appeared to nostalgic observers.⁶⁰ The succeeding phrase, 'where late the sweet birds sang', is intriguingly close to the Walsingham poet's lament that 'Owls do scrike where the sweetest hymns lately were sung.' Shakespeare's shorter line, which preserves the bird imagery, the remembrance of sweet melodies, and the sense that the loss has been recent ('late'), achieves its concision by making the departed monks one with the birds. The image of birds forced to flee their nests was an established (though not always

⁵⁷ See e.g. David Knowles, *Bare Ruined Choirs: The Dissolution of the English Monasteries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

⁵⁸ See the exchange involving F. W. Bateson, William Empson, and Charles B. Wheeler, in *Essays in Criticism*, 3 (1953), 8–9, 357–62, and *Essays in Criticism*, 4 (1954), 224–26.

⁵⁹ Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁶⁰ Sherbrook, 'Fall of Religious Houses', 123–4.

friendly) figure for the fate of the religious at the dissolution.⁶¹ It has been objected that the dissolution was not literally a 'late' event from the perspective of the 1590s. However, the point of the adjective is to heighten nostalgia by making the lost world of monasticism seem just out of reach; as late as 1642, Sir John Denham could still use the phrase 'of late' with reference to the pre-dissolution glory days of Chertsey Abbey.⁶²

Read in isolation—imagined, for instance, as an Elizabethan graffito scrawled on a mouldering abbey wall—the phrase 'Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang' speaks powerfully of traditionalist nostalgia and stubborn resentment in the wake of the dissolution. Yet in its lyric context the force of the line is both muted and transmuted. Sonnet 73 is indeed concerned with dissolution, but of a different and more intimate kind than that which befell the monasteries. Its governing conceits—the shedding of the leaves in autumn, the setting of the sun, the dying of a fire—gesture gravely and gently to the impending dissolution of the living poet himself. Encountered alongside these images of natural and inevitable decline, the 'bare ruined choirs' of line 4 seem less like victims of historical violence, and more like the end to which all earthly glory tends. To the extent that the ruins become assimilated in the reader's mind to autumn and twilight, Shakespeare sounds less like Michael Sherbrook, and more like Samuel Daniel.⁶³

Yet if sonnet 73 makes the dissolution of the monasteries look like a natural phenomenon, it also and much more insistently makes natural phenomena—seasons, trees, and sunsets—look like ruins. As the first line makes clear, the reader will be required throughout to 'behold' two things at once: on the one hand, the aged poet, on the other an image of his decrepitude. To complicate matters, each half of the double image is itself double. To see the ruined abbey is to picture it full of pious choristers; to see the faltering poet is to imagine him in his creative prime. The poem works by melding on to its human subject and indeed on to the whole world of nature the peculiar kind of double vision proper to ruin-gazing. It is noteworthy that not one of the other images in the poem is, strictly speaking, an image of irreversible decline. In different circumstances these images could easily convey a promise of

⁶¹ Aston, 'English Ruins and English History', 241.

⁶² Sir John Denham, 'Cooper's Hill', in *The Poetical Works of Sir John Denham*, ed. Theodore Banks, 2nd edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), line 113.

⁶³ The sonnet also prefigures eighteenth-century perceptions of ruins as an aspect of nature; see Janowitz, *England's Ruins*, 54–91.

renewal: we know after all that spring will come, the sun will rise, a fresh fire will blaze upon the hearth. That we are content to ignore these general truths is largely due to the influence of the 'Bare ruined choirs' of line 4, whose irredeemable wrack forbids the beholder to dream of new beginnings. As in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare makes the ruined monastery the prism through which we view the wider scene. In the course of reading this sonnet, we are liable to accept without hesitation that springtime, like Catholic England, is only a nostalgic memory, never to come again.

In sonnet 73, the double gaze doubles back, creating a split image not only of the monastery, but of the poet. The effect Shakespeare achieves here finds a remarkable precedent in the Flemish painter Maarten van Heemskerck's self-portrait with the Colosseum, painted in 1553 (Fig. 5). The painting's composition creates a forceful parallel between this sombrely dressed man in his mid-fifties and the ruined edifice. Even the small tufts of hair protruding from his head and beard seem to mirror the foliage growing atop the ruined walls. Yet Heemskerck and the grand ruin are not exactly side-by-side; the way his gown partially obscures the tablet at the bottom indicates that the artist is standing in front of as well as within his work.⁶⁴ The portrait was in fact produced twenty years after Heemskerck's youthful sojourn in the Eternal City. There, as an awestruck, indefatigable sketcher, Heemskerck had put his stamp on a vision of classical grandeur that influenced a generation of northern artists.⁶⁵ And it is this younger self, or so it is thought, whom we find depicted in the middle ground, a colourfully dressed youth utterly absorbed in his work. The ruin stands between Heemskerck's two selves. The young man's inspiration is the old man's mirror.

In his self-portrait, Heemskerck seems clearly to say, 'I resemble this noble ruin.' Shakespeare, I have suggested, is saying something similar.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ See 'Maarten van Heemskerck, 1498–1574: *Selfportrait, with the Colosseum behind*, 1553', Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos/collection_pages/northern_pages/103/TXT_SE-103.html).

⁶⁵ See the references to Heemskerck in Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*.

⁶⁶ Also comparable, if rather more straightforward, are the lines on Wolsey's grave in Thomas Storer's *The Life and Death of Thomas Wolsey* (London, 1599):

Behold my grave, where scarce lies any stone
To cover me, nor roof to cover it,
And when thou seest our ruins both in one,
One epitaph will equally befit
The church and me, let never man of wit



Fig. 5. Maarten van Heemskerck, 1498–1574, *Self-portrait, with the Colosseum behind*, 1553

It is no trifling matter, however, to determine the precise relationship between the ‘me’ of line 1 and the ‘Bare ruined choirs’ of line 4. As Stephen Booth has shown, what happens to the metaphor—and to the reader—in the course of the first quatrain of sonnet 73 is remarkably complex.⁶⁷ By the time he invokes ‘Bare ruined choirs’, the poet is already and in more than one sense out on a limb. Having initially invited the lover-reader to behold in him a certain season of the year, Shakespeare identifies that season in line 2 through the image of autumnal leaves—and then, in line 3, nudges the tenor so that the poet now seems identified directly with the boughs, which respond to the falling temperature with a very human shiver. Shakespeare crowns the swirling figures of this quatrain with a line that demands to be

Be used therein; paint on the churches wall,
Here lies an Abbey, there a Cardinal.

(IIr)

⁶⁷ Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 118–25.

read in at least two quite different ways. The 'Bare ruined choirs' of line 4 are at once an amplification of the bough metaphor (I am like a leafless branch, deserted by the tuneful larks) and a fresh figure for the ageing poet (I am like a ruined abbey, bereft of pious choristers). Not only are both readings valid, but they are so intertwined that it is impossible to choose one over the other, to 'see' the abbey without also catching a glimpse of grey branches. In the first half of the line, the literal 'Bare ruined choirs' serve as a figure for the boughs; in the second half, tenor and vehicle switch tracks, so that the 'sweet birds' which literally sang upon the bough serve as figures for the departed monks. Whether, at any particular point, the reader sees a bare branch or a ruined abbey depends largely upon the angle of vision. With a slight tilt of the head, one can watch the ruin merging in and out of the quivering boughs.⁶⁸

The fourth line of sonnet 73 can be seen as the linguistic equivalent of those ambiguous line-drawings, such as the well-known duck-rabbit, which look like two quite dissimilar objects depending on one's point of view. In cases of this sort, it does not seem right to say that there is one picture that can be interpreted in two distinct ways, but rather that two distinct pictures occupy the same space, and are composed out of precisely the same formal elements.⁶⁹ A still closer approximation of what the mind's eye perceives in reading Shakespeare's line occurs in a passage in Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*. Here, Freud is seeking a visual analogy for the strange architecture of the mind, wherein the most primitive formations persist and coincide with newer structures arising from their foundations. He invites the reader to imagine the city of Rome as it would appear if every phase of its development were still visible above ground.

⁶⁸ As Booth observes, with reference to line 4, 'as the line in which it appears is read, any given word is likely to slide imperceptibly from one system of relationship into another' (*ibid.*, 120).

⁶⁹ For a previous application of the duck-rabbit concept to Shakespeare's works, see Norman Rabkin, 'Rabbits, Ducks, and Henry V', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 28 (1977), 279-96. The usual claim is that while the viewer can see duck and rabbit in rapid succession, it is impossible to see both at the same time. (See e.g. the remarks of E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study of the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon, 1960), 5-6.) This does not seem to me to apply to line 4 of sonnet 73, for if we cannot see both the bough and the ruin clearly and completely in the same moment, we do see the shimmer of metamorphosis. But Wittgenstein, writing of the duck-rabbit, speaks of 'the "dawning" of an aspect', a phrase which seems to allow for an ambiguous moment of transition; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edn. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 194.

Let us, by a flight of the imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past—an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away, and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one . . . Where the Coliseum now stands we could at the same time admire Nero's vanished Golden House . . . [t]he same piece of ground would be supporting the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva and the ancient temple over which it was built. And the observer would perhaps only have to change his glance or his position in order to call up the one view or the other.⁷⁰

Freud the archaeological enthusiast has taken the helm in this passage. The fantasy of architectural synchronicity is elaborated in loving detail, revealing as much, perhaps, about the author's own psyche as about the human mind in general. At last he reins himself in:

There is clearly no point in spinning our fantasy any further, for it leads to things that are unimaginable and even absurd. If we want to represent historical sequence in spatial terms we can only do it by juxtaposition in space. The same space cannot have two different contents. Our attempt seems to be an idle game. It has only one justification. It shows us how far we are from mastering the characteristics of mental life by representing them in pictorial terms.⁷¹

Freud's common-sense observation that 'the same space cannot have two different contents' is true enough if content is equated with physical matter. Yet if we think of the early modern sense of 'content' as 'tenor, purport', then it is evident that a single space and indeed a single form can have two different contents.⁷² This way of seeing, which I have been terming 'double vision', is the thread that runs through the 'Lament for Our Lady's Shrine at Walsingham', the monastery episode in *The Faerie Queene*, and Shakespeare's sonnet 73. As I have suggested, in each of these cases the gaze that fixes on the dual image of ruin doubles back to open a similar division within the gazer; we see not only two ruins but two Shakespeares, two Spensers, two Philip Arundels (or someone like him). As in Freud, the multiform architectural image provides an angle of vision into the enigmas of the human psyche. Each of these ruin poems responds to the sudden downfall of the monasteries, but each in addition represents the secret motions of the mind.

⁷⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 18. See Janowitz, *England's Ruins*, 50–3.

⁷¹ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 18–19.

⁷² *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'content', 1.3.

4

Charnel Knowledge Open Graves in Shakespeare and Donne

ON an April morning in 1549, Londoners might have observed a long convoy of carts wending its way from the heart of the city to Finsbury Fields on the northern outskirts. Its load consisted entirely of human bones, in almost unimaginable quantities. It reportedly took more than a thousand cart-loads to empty the charnel house of St Paul's, the greatest ossuary in England. The last earthly remnants of countless men, women, and children who had lived and died in London over the last four centuries were dumped without ceremony on a marshy patch of ground. Covered over with the filth and refuse of the city, they provided solid foundations for three windmills. The cartage was paid for by the printer Reginald Wolfe, a founding member of the Stationers' Company. He had made a canny bargain. The chapel above the evacuated charnel house was remodelled to provide space for booksellers' stalls. Texts had quite literally usurped the place of the dead.¹

Originating in the twelfth century, medieval charnel houses were constructed to provide for an ongoing relationship with the dead whilst easing pressure on overcrowded urban churchyards (Fig. 6). For the body to rest at peace in the grave until the last trump might have been an ideal, but it was not always a practical possibility. 'Clean' bones, unearthed by the sexton's spade in the course of preparing fresh burials, were redeposited with due ceremony in the charnel house. Medieval burials were not generally marked with gravestones, and there seems to have been little sense (aristocratic tombs aside) that the resting place of one's body could or should constitute a kind of inalienable private

¹ John Stow, *Stow's Survey of London*, ed. H. B. Wheatley (London: Dent, 1956), 295; see Vanessa Harding, *The Dead and the Living in Paris and London, 1500–1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 91; Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 107.



Fig. 6. A gravedigger casts up fragments of bone whilst preparing a new grave. From a Book of Hours associated with the family of Saluces, British Library MS Add. 27697, fo. 194

property. (After all, such a notion of property was essentially alien to the feudal system.) The important thing was that the anonymous, defleshed, and disarticulated occupants of the charnel house remained,

both physically and figuratively, part of the church.² The emphasis was on the body's corporate integration, rather than its corporeal integrity. In practical terms, dismemberment was the price of remembrance.

The Reformation, with its deep scepticism regarding relics and prayer for departed souls, radically transformed the spiritual status of human remains. No longer could fragmented body parts serve as the conduits through which spiritual aid flowed between the dead and the living. The bones, one might say, had gone dead. In some cases, as at St. Paul's in 1549, Protestants seem to have made a self-conscious show of their new-found contempt for human carcasses.³ At Canterbury, the bones of Thomas Becket, false idol and traitor to his king, were taken from their shrine and scattered.⁴ The remains of other English saints fared little better. *The Rites of Durham* includes a vivid account of the opening of Cuthbert's tomb, with the outraged commissioner roaring 'cast down his bones!' whilst a stammering workman attempts to explain that Cuthbert is still in the flesh.⁵ Through such calculated acts of desecration, Peter Marshall suggests, 'the reformers were signalling a decisive rescheduling of the debts claimed from the living by the dead'.⁶ Dishonouring the bodies of the dead was also a way of striking a blow by proxy at the body of the Catholic Church. Protestant audiences were presumably expected to enjoy the discomfiture of the cardinal who complains, in Thomas Dekker's *The Whore of Babylon* (1607), that:

Vast charnel-houses, where our fathers' heads
Slept on the cold hard pillows of the earth,
Are emptied now, and chang'd to drinking rooms,
Or vaults for baser office.⁷

² On medieval attitudes to the fragmentation of the body and the role of the charnel house, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 201–14, 326–7. On the incorporation of the body within the fabric of the church, see Howard Williams, 'Remembering and Forgetting the Medieval Dead: Exploring Death, Memory, and Material Culture in Monastic Archaeology', in Howard Williams (ed.), *Archaeologies of Remembrance: Death and Memory in Past Societies* (New York: Kluwer/Plenum, 2003), 227–54.

³ On early Protestant 'rage against the dead', see Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 93–123.

⁴ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 412.

⁵ *Rites of Durham*, ed. J. T. Fowler (Durham: Surtees Society, 1903), 102–3. Perhaps this was wishful thinking; whatever shape they were in, Cuthbert's remains were quietly reburied beneath the spot where his shrine had stood.

⁶ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 107.

⁷ Thomas Dekker, *The Whore of Babylon* (London, 1607), B2r.

In the reign of Mary, English Catholics would retaliate with similar assaults on the Protestant dead. The wife of Peter Martyr was exhumed from her grave in Christ Church, Oxford, and deposited in a dunghill. At Cambridge in 1557, the carcasses of two leading reformers were exhumed, tried, and publicly burned.⁸

The naked aggression displayed towards the medieval dead in the turbulent years of Reformation did not persist. As John Weever rejoiced to remember, an early Elizabethan proclamation explicitly condemned the violation of tombs as an unacceptable excess of iconoclasm.⁹ Yet, much as most Protestants might have preferred simply to let the dead be, this was not a practical possibility. The demographic pressures that had led to the establishment of charnel houses—high urban mortality rates, and limited space in urban churchyards—became ever more acute in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, above all in times of plague. By 1622, the churchyard of St Botolph Bishopsgate was ‘buried so full that convenient ground can hardly be found for the burial of a child’.¹⁰ Something had to be done with the dead whose tenancy had expired. On the whole, pragmatism prevailed. Bones which might once have been laid up in the charnel house were buried in deep pits, or shipped away for reuse as fertilizer. In the later seventeenth century, John Aubrey observed that ‘our bones in consecrated ground never lie quiet: and in London once in ten years (or thereabout) the earth is carried to the Dung-Wharf.’¹¹

Shifts in burial practices following the Reformation reflect a dialectic between the need of the community to manage surplus human remains practically and without superstition, and the desperation of individuals to protect their own remains from the ensuing consequences. Coffin burial, rare before the Reformation, became increasingly common in the later sixteenth century, and the norm in the seventeenth.

⁸ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 122–3. There remains a clear distinction between Catholic and early Protestant modes of desecrating human remains. Broadly speaking, where Protestants abused corpses, it was on the grounds that they had no spiritual significance; where Catholics abused corpses, it was because they did. The rule is not absolute—the vindictive scattering of Becket’s bones in particular suggests a desire to strike, through the body, at the departed soul.

⁹ John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (London, 1631), 52. On the motives and success (both mixed) of the proclamation of 1560, see Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 169–72.

¹⁰ Quoted in Harding, *The Dead and the Living*, 63.

¹¹ Quoted *ibid.* 65; see Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 334–5.

Churchwardens, recognizing the obstacle posed by wooden and (especially) lead coffins to the efficient reuse of burial space, responded by charging higher fees.¹² Similarly, burial within the walls of the church, which in the past had been largely reserved for elite benefactors, became a more widespread (though still expensive) aspiration. The tensions between individuals determined to lay permanent claim to a plot and church officials casting an anxious eye on future needs were the same in the chancel as in the churchyard.¹³ Finally, well-heeled families could aspire to the exclusivity of the private vault, which in some cases might be situated in the old charnel house.¹⁴ Each of these developments reflects a determination to lay claim to one's last resting place as permanent private property, foiling forever the dreaded sexton and his spade. Regardless of confessional stereotypes, early modern English Protestants were by and large more obsessed with the fate of their individual bodies post-mortem, and more scrupulous in providing for the corpses' needs, than their medieval Catholic forebears. Expulsion from the grave, which in an earlier age could have been seen as simply one more stage in an ongoing and always reciprocal relationship with the church, came to be seen as an irredeemable abomination.

The horror which we associate today with the violation of graves has its main origins in the early modern period. In our modern nightmares, the sturdy sexton has given way to the vampire, the vivisectionist, the anti-Semite—and the archaeologist. From its inception, archaeology has been tainted in the public imagination by its resemblance to grave-robbing. Mortuary excavation is not only one archaeological activity among many but, inasmuch as archaeology always aims to open up paths into the world of the dead, its quintessential practice. As Mortimer Wheeler insisted, the essence of all archaeology is exhumation: 'the archaeological excavator is not digging up things, he is digging up people.'¹⁵ The fundamental nature and ethics of archaeology have been called into question in debates with Native Americans and others over

¹² For the statistical rise in coffin burial over the period 1581–1650, see Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 240; on fees, Harding, *The Dead and the Living*, 59–60.

¹³ Thus, the vestry of St Mary Colechurch in London ruled in 1615 that 'none shall be buried in our church in a ridged coffin but in a square flat coffin, which may be no hindrance to the burial of two corps in one grave if need be'. Harding, *The Dead and the Living*, 142.

¹⁴ Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family*, 338; Harding, *The Dead and the Living*, 147–75.

¹⁵ Mortimer Wheeler, *Archaeology from the Earth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 2.

the treatment of indigenous remains. The image of the archaeologist as ghoul is latent in Walter Echo-Hawk's blunt demand, 'What are you doing with all those bones?'¹⁶ Archaeologists themselves are not immune to the horror that attends disturbing the dead, especially the comparatively recently dead. Participants in cemetery excavations report 'strange dreams and dramatic mood swings, both of which they put down to their day to day work of digging up the dead'.¹⁷ Recently, it has been argued that the suppression of powerful emotions called up by handling the dead can lead archaeologists to misconstrue the past, as well as the nature of their own activity.¹⁸

Yet if disturbing the peace of the dead is inescapably associated with evil and depravity, it can also carry contradictory and highly positive connotations. The opening of graves is an enduring figure, both biblical and contemporary, for the revelation of truth. The archaeologist as detective is a classic Enlightenment protagonist, bravely bearing the beam of rational enquiry into the kingdom of secrets and shadows.¹⁹ Just as excavation is a pervasive metaphor for the recovery of knowledge, the encounter between the living and the dead is understood to signal the (however belated) arrival of judgement. This is above all true where archaeologists are called upon to exhume the recently deceased. The role of the forensic archaeologist is to interview the dead and place their testimony, literally or figuratively, before the court.²⁰ In the aftermath of genocidal conflicts in the Balkans, Rwanda, and elsewhere, the forensic archaeologist has emerged as a peculiarly modern hero.²¹ For all its obvious horror, the excavation of mass graves has come to stand for

¹⁶ Quoted in Michael Shanks, *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1992), 70.

¹⁷ Jane Downes and Tony Pollard (eds.), *The Loved Body's Corruption: Archaeological Contributions to the Study of Human Mortality* (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1999), p. xi. In the same volume, see also Angela Boyle, 'A Grave Disturbance: Archaeological Perceptions of the Recently Dead', 187–99. On digging and despair, see Jennifer Wallace, *Digging the Dirt: The Archaeological Imagination* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 129–51.

¹⁸ Sarah Tarlow, *Bereavement and Commemoration: An Archaeology of Mortality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 20–36.

¹⁹ Cornelius Holtorf, *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2005), 33–4; Shanks, *Experiencing the Past*, 53–4.

²⁰ J. R. Hunter, 'The Excavation of Modern Murder', in Downes and Pollard (eds.), *The Loved Body's Corruption*, 209–20.

²¹ Clea Koff, *The Bone Woman: A Forensic Anthropologist's Search for Truth in the Mass Graves of Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo* (New York: Random House, 2004); Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2001).

the triumph of truth over tyranny and freedom over fear. The ghoul, it appears, is also an angel of light.²²

This chapter will examine the motif of the open grave as at once a site of knowledge and a sign of despair in the works of Shakespeare and John Donne. Both writers were, in different ways, preoccupied with the fate of the body after death. Shakespeare appears to have regarded the possibility of exhumation with a deep and peculiar horror. In *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*, the opening of tombs or graves is portrayed as a deed of violence whose monstrousness exceeds that of death itself. These plays, like Shakespeare's own tomb inscription, betray a desperate longing for the preservation of the body's integrity and the survival of the private self. By contrast, John Donne, who has been dubbed the 'other great voice of morbid intellect in this period', seems in his sermons and his love poetry to welcome the prospect of posthumous exposure and dissolution.²³ For Donne, the grave is anything but a private place. The dead do indeed embrace there, becoming intertwined, losing individual integrity as they join larger communities, both erotic and religious. The contrast between Shakespeare and Donne finds unexpected echoes in present-day debates over the spiritual significance of and respect due to human remains.

'CURSED BE HE THAT MOVES MY BONES'

Inscribed on a freestone slab in the chancel of the Church of the Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon, are what may be the last lines of poetry Shakespeare ever composed.

Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blessed be the man that spares these stones,
And cursed be he that moves my bones.

²² The tangled association of exhumation with both justice and depravity helps explain its popularity as a motif in Jacobean revenge tragedy. In both *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, righteous vengeance joins hands with necrophilia, as tyrants are slain by a kiss from an exhumed body's poisoned lips. On these and related examples, see Susan Zimmerman, *The Early Modern Corpse and Shakespeare's Theatre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

²³ Robert N. Watson, *The Rest is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 82.

There is, of course, no way of knowing for certain that these verses are Shakespeare's own. Certainly, their quality has not struck most readers as worthy of the author who presumably lies beneath them. (Evidence, it might be said, that you can't judge a poet by his cover.) Yet the quatrain is somewhat more subtle than it may at first appear. It is also far less commonplace than it is often declared to be. In its sentiments and strategies if not in its style, the epitaph is at once daringly unconventional and distinctly Shakespearean.²⁴

Since the nineteenth century, there have been numerous proposals to open the grave in Holy Trinity, usually with the aim of demonstrating either that Shakespeare was the author of the plays, or that he was not (Fig. 7).²⁵ The stern inscription on the slab has been at least partially responsible for the fact that none of these projects has been carried through. Yet Shakespeare had no need to foresee the modern excesses of his cult in order to know that his resting place in the chancel was not indefinitely secure. Biographers have wondered whether the inscription was meant to prevent the interment of Anne Shakespeare under the same slab; the suggestion is that the playwright could not bear the thought of lying beside his wife, even in the earth.²⁶ More probably, he feared the removal of his remains to the charnel house, whose entrance still loomed in a corner of the chancel, its spiritual status having been reduced, following the Reformation, to that of an unhallowed dump. The proscription against digging would also preclude the opening of the grave to permit strangers to be laid to rest beside or even on top of the original occupant. With ever-growing numbers seeking intramural burial in an ever-dwindling space, the only solution in many churches was to pack the dead like sardines. Fifty years later, Samuel Pepys was appalled to hear the sexton, undertaking to bury his brother in the middle aisle of a popular church, promise that 'I will jostle them together but I will make room for him.'²⁷ A late seventeenth-century tradition suggests that Shakespeare had his grave

²⁴ A demonstrable link between the inscription and Shakespeare's plays would, of course, suggest that the Stratford citizen buried in Holy Trinity was indeed the author of the works published under his name. There is thus little comfort in my argument for proponents of alternative authorship theories.

²⁵ Howard Marchitello, *Narrative and Meaning in Early Modern England: Browne's Skull and Other Histories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 129–34.

²⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 147–8; Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes From His Life* (London: Arden, 2001), 274.

²⁷ Quoted in Harding, *The Dead and the Living*, 142.



Fig. 7. A caricature of 'bohemians' attempting to open the grave of Shakespeare. Cartoon by Thomas Nast, *Harper's Weekly*, 3 October 1874

dug to the extraordinary depth of seventeen feet in order to protect himself from disturbance, but if privacy was his goal this would have been the worst of stratagems.²⁸ Churches often provided for the future

²⁸ As Samuel Schoenbaum points out, at such a depth Shakespeare's grave would likely be steeped in the waters of the Avon (*William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 273).

by digging deep shafts, in which as many as eleven bodies might be stacked.²⁹

The inscription on Shakespeare's grave is frequently said to be commonplace or conventional, and hence, it is implied, not worth the raising of an eyebrow. Holy Trinity Church reassures visitors to its website that placing such a curse on one's gravestone was 'not at all uncommon at the time'.³⁰ Samuel Schoenbaum describes the epitaph as 'a conventional sentiment in commonplace phrases', while Michael Neill calls it a 'formulaic curse'. *The Norton Shakespeare*, a touch more cautiously, dubs the malediction 'apparently conventional'.³¹ Nowhere, however, are such remarks accompanied by examples of contemporary epitaphs closely resembling Shakespeare's. The nervous insistence that Shakespeare was 'normal' in his attitude to entombment is itself testimony to our anxious sense that, in this matter, he was anything but. Far from following funerary conventions, the quatrain overturns and parodies them in a manner that can only be self-conscious. Like many of Shakespeare's sonnets, the epitaph sets up readerly expectations only in order to defeat them.

On first encountering the inscription—say, as a curious visitor to the church—it is natural to assume that 'good friend', like the conventional 'ye who pass by', refers to oneself, the reader pausing at the foot of the grave. The ensuing phrase 'for Jesus sake' is also calculated to arouse certain expectations. The injunction to the reader to do something 'for Jesus sake' (or for his love or in his name) was common enough on pre-Reformation funerary inscriptions. The thing to be done was, of course, to pray for the soul of the departed (with the epitaph sometimes even specifying the prayers to be said).³² By contrast, epitaphs composed after the proscription of prayer for the dead in the reign of Edward VI rarely exhort the living to do anything

²⁹ Roberta Gilchrist, '“Dust to Dust”: Revealing the Reformation Dead', in David Gaimster and Roberta Gilchrist (eds.), *The Archaeology of Reformation, 1480–1580* (Leeds: Maney, 2003), 405 (399–414); see also David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 466.

³⁰ 'The Shakespeare Connection', Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon (<http://www.stratford-upon-avon.org/bard.html>).

³¹ Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life*, 273; Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 265; *Norton Shakespeare*, 1992.

³² See e.g. J Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, 283, 285.

for Jesus's sake, though they occasionally appeal directly for his mercy.³³ Audaciously flirting with the forbidden, Shakespeare's epitaph begins by setting up the expectation that it will involve a plea for prayers to be said on the dead poet's behalf. The verb with which the first line in fact concludes, 'forbear', is calculated to shock in that it precisely reverses—*without* Protestantizing—Catholic assumptions. Rather than desiring the orisons of the living, Shakespeare's epitaph suggests, the dead want only to be left alone. Accompanying this surprise is the belated revelation that the 'good friend' is not the general reader, but a specific individual, the church sexton. In what he must have known would be regarded as his last piece of verse, Shakespeare addresses himself neither to his age nor to all time, nor even to his God, but to a minor ecclesiastical functionary.

With its jealous and aggressive insistence on privacy, Shakespeare's epitaph bears a disquieting resemblance to that of the misanthrope Timon of Athens:

Here lies a wretched corpse,
Of wretched soul bereft.
Seek not my name. A plague consume
You wicked caitiffs left!
Here lie I, Timon, who alive
All living men did hate.
Pass by and curse thy fill, but pass
And stay not here thy gait.

(*Timon of Athens*, 5.5.71–8)

If anything, Shakespeare outdoes Timon in his readiness not merely to receive curses but to dish them out. Again, this is anything but a conventional feature of seventeenth-century funerary inscription. John Weever's *Ancient Funerall Monuments* cites numerous examples of curses threatened or enacted against tomb-robbers in classical Rome, but nothing comparable from early modern England. Perhaps the closest parallel, John Skelton's Latin epitaph for the Countess of Richmond (d. 1509) in Westminster Abbey, concluded with a malediction on any who would violate, deface, or remove the inscription. This threat

³³ Even the appeal to Jesus's mercy was dubious from a strictly Protestant point of view, implying as it did that the soul's fate was not entirely settled at the time of death. See Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 177–8.

was presumably directed against potential thieves or vandals.³⁴ What is most remarkable about the inscription in Stratford is not merely that it incorporates a curse, but that the curse is threatened against officers (rather than enemies) of the church, with the aim of laying permanent claim to a portion of the chancel on behalf of a private individual. The wardens of Holy Trinity would surely never have permitted such an epitaph were it not that Shakespeare was a tithe holder, with responsibility for the upkeep of the chancel in which he was interred.

Shakespeare's epitaph marks his final, uncompromising statement on a theme that preoccupied him throughout his career as a writer for the stage. The blessings of a quiet grave are famously celebrated in the well-known funeral song from *Cymbeline*, sung over the apparently dead body of Imogen.

Fear no more the heat o' th' sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages.
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers come to dust.

(4.2.259–64)

The song begins by articulating a view of the grave as a place of rest after the painful labours of the world. Although not impeccably Christian, this view of death remained powerfully attractive in Shakespeare's time, as it is today.³⁵ Yet, in the final stanza of the song, the attention of the singers shifts to the many threats that might be posed to the peace of the grave:

GUIDERIUS. No exorciser harm thee!
ARVIRAGUS. Nor no witchcraft charm thee!
GUIDERIUS. Ghost unlaid forbear thee!
ARVIRAGUS. Nothing ill come near thee!
GUIDERIUS and ARVIRAGUS. Quiet consummation have;
And renown'd be thy grave!

(4.2.277–82)

The commonplace sentiment that the grave is the end of all earthly troubles is suddenly disrupted by the anxiety that it may be no such

³⁴ Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments*, 477.

³⁵ See Watson, *The Rest is Silence*.

thing. The concluding stanza is, in some sense, a prayer for the dead but, like the inscription in Holy Trinity, it is anti-intercessory, pleading only that the dead should be left alone to achieve a 'quiet consummation'. 'Consummation' is a euphemism for death, understood as the completed or even perfected state of a human being. In this context, it also carries the sense of 'consumption', a reminder of the biological processes whereby the body achieves its final status as dust. For the British pagans of *Cymbeline*, and for many others in Shakespeare's plays, to moulder in privacy is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

This is not to suggest that Shakespeare romanticizes rot or shies away from the ugliness of what happens in the grave. There is nothing obviously consoling in Hotspur's dying awareness that he is 'dust | And food for—[worms]' (*1 Henry IV*, 5.4.84–85). Claudio in *Measure for Measure* looks forward with anxious dread to the comfortless fate of his corpse: 'To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot; | This sensible warm motion to become | A kneaded clod . . .' (3.1.119–21). Yet the body's inevitable and disgusting destiny was not for Shakespeare the compelling theme that it was for instinctual moralists like the young George Herbert (who shuddered at the thought of embracing 'that, which one day, worms may chance refuse').³⁶ Shakespeare was far less preoccupied with what he knew would happen to his body than with what he feared *might* happen to it. In light of the fates that overtake vulnerable human remains in many of his plays (and, for that matter, the posthumous mutilation of the pirate Ragozine in *Measure for Measure*), 'to lie in cold obstruction and to rot' begins to look like a best case scenario.

The tragedies and histories offer a catalogue of the nauseating and shameful fates which the human body may undergo if denied decent inhumation. To be exposed for any length of time in death, even without further insult on the body, is seen as deeply humiliating, especially as the corpse becomes bloated with gas and infested with larvae.³⁷ The bitter Cleopatra invites her captors to 'on Nilus' mud | Lay me stark naked, and let the water-flies | Blow me into abhorring' (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.57–9). In *1 Henry VI*, Joan exults over the body of Talbot which lies 'stinking and flyblown' (4.7.76) at her feet. At the

³⁶ George Herbert, 'Sonnet (1)', in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1974), 205.

³⁷ On the shamefulness of death in the early modern era, and its association with nakedness, see Neill, *Issues of Death*, 8–13.

moment of his banishment, Coriolanus can think of no deeper insult to fling at the populace than to compare their loves to 'the dead carcasses of unburied men | That do corrupt my air' (3.3.126–7). The motif of the unburied corpse had strong political overtones. The denial of burial was the final insult meted out to executed traitors, whose heads, and sometimes other extremities, were placed on public display until they had been consumed by scavengers large and small. It is in this spirit that the evil Tamora's corpse is left 'to beasts and birds to prey' (*Titus Andronicus*, 5.3.197) and the headless trunk of the rebel Jack Cade is thrown on a dunghill 'for crows to feed upon' (2 *Henry VI*, 4.9.81). The dunghill—symbolic repository of the utterly unvalued—is also the last resting place of Cornwall's rebellious servant in *King Lear* (3.7.101) and, potentially, of the English soldiers in *Henry V* (4.3.100). Finally, Shakespeare had a career-long obsession with the horror and strange wonder of sea-burial. In *Richard III*, Clarence beholds in a dream 'Ten thousand men that fishes gnawed upon' (1.4.25), and a seabed littered with dead bones, 'mocked' (1.4.33) by the glittering light of sunken gems. The image is recycled and superficially prettified in *The Tempest*, where Ariel sings of Alonso's 'sea-change' (1.2.400–6; see Chapter 1). Burying his wife Thaisa at sea, Pericles regrets that he has no time:

To give thee hallowed to thy grave, but straight
Must cast thee, scarcely coffined, in the ooze,
Where, for a monument upon thy bones,
And aye-remaining lamps, the belching whale
And humming water must o'erwhelm thy corpse,
Lying with simple shells.

(*Pericles*, 11.58–63)

It is striking not only that Shakespeare should return repeatedly to the image of the body dreadfully exposed on the ocean floor, but also that he seems to have been able to imagine such a fate only as a false hypothesis: the corpses Clarence sees are but the figments of nightmare, and both Alonso and Thaisa will turn out to be alive and well.

To deny the dead the decency of burial in consecrated ground was perhaps the deepest as well as the final rejection of which early modern society was capable. Yet Shakespeare was able to imagine a rejection still more devastating, that is, rejection by the grave itself. In their encounters with ghosts, both Hamlet and Macbeth do not immediately assume that they are beholding spirits, but rather the actual bodies of the dead,

vomited forth by the grave.³⁸ Addressing the ‘dead corpse’ (1.4.33) of his father, Hamlet demands to know

why the sepulchre,
Wherein we saw thee quietly enurned,
Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws,
To cast thee up again.

(1.4.29–32)

Confronted with the murdered Banquo, Macbeth snarls with hysteria-tinged bravado, ‘If charnel-houses and our graves must send | Those that we bury back, our monuments | Shall be the maws of kites’ (3.4.70–2). Where the audience sees a relationship between the living and the dead, Hamlet and Macbeth speak instead of a relationship between the living and the earth, to which the bodies of the dead are entrusted for safe-keeping. Even when confronted with what appears to be an animated corpse, they would rather impute agency to the tomb, which has reneged on its bargain, than to the dead individual. This may suggest an instinctive Protestant reluctance to imagine the dead as being in any way active in their relationship with the living. It may also help us to perceive the way in which the grave is indeed an active agent, rather than a mute receptacle, its role being to maintain a barrier between the living and the dead and facilitate their gradual distancing from one another. Where adorned with a headstone, the grave may serve as an *aide-mémoire*, but its no less fundamental function is as an *aide-oubli*.

The work of the grave embraces both recollection and oblivion, and the two functions are not necessarily at odds. It could be said that memory and forgetting are the twin products of inhumation, with the latter only gradually and imperceptibly gaining preponderance over the former.³⁹ What the grave in fact withholds from the living, and is designed to withhold, is not memory but knowledge of the dead—knowledge in the sense of one individual being known by another. The living may continue to love and honour the buried dead, to pray for them and seek their aid, but they can no longer know them. For whilst love, reverence, and remembrance can all be maintained

³⁸ On the shamefulness of death in the early modern era, and its association with nakedness, see Neill, *Issues of Death*, 257–8; Zimmerman, *The Early Modern Corpse*, 181–3.

³⁹ Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 33–41; Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages: The Living and the Dead in Medieval Society*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5–6.

towards a disembodied self or soul, the relationship we term 'knowing' is necessarily mediated through the body. To know a person may involve some insight into their mind or dispositions, but it is fundamentally, as Prince Hal puts it, 'to know thy face tomorrow' (2 *Henry IV*, 2.2.13). In this sense, all knowledge we have of others is carnal knowledge. Far from denigrating this dependence on the body, Christian teaching has traditionally reinforced it. Preachers of Shakespeare's era dwelt on the ecstatic physicality of the reunions that would take place in heaven between loved ones re clothed in flesh:

Our two old friends the soul and the body shall meet again after so many years separation . . . Also fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, masters and servants, brothers and sisters, parents and children, neighbours and friends, all shall meet together. What cries and shouts will there be for joy? What clapping of hands and sweet embracements one of another?⁴⁰

Yet the very thing that makes this vision of paradise so compelling—its ratification of our sense that to know another is to know them in the flesh—is what makes the idea of knowing the dead so problematic and so troubling. Witnesses to a death do not cease at once to *know* the body of the deceased, even as they know that what they knew has departed from it.⁴¹ 'Cover her face', entreats Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi*, 'mine eyes dazzle.'⁴² The body must be obscured not only for sanitary or aesthetic reasons, but in order to allow other modes of relation to the dead to take hold. Memory begins where knowledge ends, at the side of the grave.

In Shakespeare's plays, as in mortuary archaeology, the opening of graves gives rise to knowledge—not knowledge in the form of data and evidence, however, but the knowing of the dead by the living, charnel knowledge. In *Hamlet*, Horatio concludes his report of his first encounter with the ghost by telling Hamlet 'I knew your father. These hands are not more like' (1.2.211–12). The line is often misread, not least on the stage. Horatio is not saying something like, 'I was so well-acquainted with your father that I could not be mistaken about the resemblance'. Horatio did not know Old Hamlet during his lifetime;

⁴⁰ John Andrewes, *A Celestiall Looking-glasse: to Behold the Beauty of Heaven* (London, 1621), 27–8.

⁴¹ Cf. Elisabeth Bronfen's remarks on the cadaver as self-resembling spectacle: Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 104.

⁴² John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, in *The Selected Plays of John Webster*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4.2.267.

by his own admission earlier in the same scene, he only 'saw him once' (1.2.185). The words 'I knew your father' can only refer to what Horatio felt and experienced on the castle walls a few hours ago—he is telling Hamlet that he has known the dead. What Horatio 'knew' in those terrifying moments is quite distinct and even at odds with what, in an academic sense, he 'knows' about apparitions. An identical certainty overtakes Hamlet when he first sights the ghost the following night: 'I'll call thee king, father, royal Dane.' Hamlet does not at this (or perhaps any) point in the play know for certain *what* the ghost is: 'spirit of health or goblin damned' (1.4.21). None the less, from the moment he lays eyes upon the armoured figure, he knows *who* it is. The instant and ineradicable conviction with which Hamlet knows his father will have far greater consequences for the play than that scholarly scepticism on the subject of spectres which he derides as 'our philosophy' (1.5.69).

Shakespeare's tragedies repeatedly transport us into the realms of charnel knowledge. Again and again, the tragedies return to the primal scene of archaeology, the breaking of the living into the house of the dead. In *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*, we see the opening of family vaults where generations of the dead lie interred. In *Hamlet*, the clownish sexton digs Ophelia's grave, tossing up old skulls in the process. In every case, the outcome of the 'dig' is dismal in the extreme: physical dissolution and dismemberment, mental breakdown, and violence both among the living and between the living and the dead. These nightmarish scenes of exhumation provide us with unusual and unsettling insight into the mind that would go on to compose the epitaph in the Church of the Holy Trinity, Stratford.⁴³

Shakespeare's first tragedy begins, and his second tragedy concludes, on the doorstep of a family vault. The vogue for such private crypts was still fairly new when he wrote: the reign of Elizabethan inaugurated 'the great period of the private vault'.⁴⁴ In size, these burial places ranged from double-width brick-lined graves to great subterranean crypts, sometimes constructed within the confines of former charnel houses.

⁴³ After *Hamlet*, Shakespeare would never again stage exhumation so directly, though the theme is present in many plays from the second half of his career—for example, in *King Lear*, where the king complains, 'You do me wrong to take me out o' the grave' (4.7.45), in *Pericles* where Thaisa is discovered within her coffin, and in the funeral song in *Cymbeline*. It is notable that in all of these cases the 'dead' individual is in fact alive.

⁴⁴ Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and the Family*, 338; on family monuments in Elizabethan and Stuart England, see Nigel Llewellyn, *Funeral Monuments in Post-Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 300–7 and *passim*; Harding, *The Dead and the Living*, 147–75.

Although far more exclusive than the charnel house, the family vault can be seen as continuing some of the same impulses by testifying to the enduring bonds between the living and the dead. The corpses in the vault remained, in a real sense, part of the noble or gentry family, participating in and enhancing the power and magnificence of their clan. Not uncommonly, living family members were displayed in effigy on the tomb façade alongside the dead relations who awaited them within. Husbands and wives, parents and children, could look forward to meeting again not only in heaven but within the fine and private space of the vault. It is this aspect of mortuary iconography above all—the notion of the dead still being capable of interaction with the living and with one another—that seems to have aroused the scorn and horror of Shakespeare.

The family vaults of Shakespeare's England were generally both fairly new and fairly small, sheltering no more than one or two generations. Those of his imagination, however, were cavernous and ancient structures, housing generation upon generation of the dead. In *Titus Andronicus*, the vault of the Andronici 'five hundred years hath stood' (1.1.347). More than a memorial to past glories, the tomb is the 'sacred receptacle' of the family's honour and prowess, a 'sweet cell of virtue and nobility' (1.1.92–3). The interment in their 'latest home' (1.1.83) of those sons of Titus who have fallen in battle with the Goths is described in terms of a family reunion: 'There greet in silence as the dead are wont' (1.1.90). Located on the very doorstep of the senate house, the vault is the chief architectural symbol of the Andronici's status in and long service to Rome—it is, in an important sense, the family residence. The swelling of the ranks of the dead on one side of the tomb door involves no diminishment of the living, but rather the reverse: it is through the death and interment of its individual members that the clan enhances its corporate status and authority in Rome. When Titus boasts that he has 'sumptuously re-edified' (1.1.348) the vault, he seems to refer not merely to architectural embellishments, but to the twenty-one sons who have become part of the mortuary fabric. Living and dead Andronici co-operate in a virtuous circle. The dead enrich the vault; the vault upholds the family.

However, in the tragedy's first scene, the ideal of mutual benefit and reciprocity between the dead and living is shattered almost as soon as it is raised. Titus concludes his speech at the mouth of the vault by seeming mildly to berate it for withholding his progeny from him: 'How many sons of mine hast thou in store | That thou wilt never render to me more!' (1.1.94–5). His son Lucius then steps forward abruptly to

demand a sacrifice, whose function is precisely to ensure that the vault will never render up its dead.⁴⁵

Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths,
That we may hew his limbs and on a pile
Ad manes fratrum sacrifice his flesh
Before this earthy prison of their bones,
That so the shadows be not unappeased,
Nor we disturbed with prodigies on earth.

(1.1.96–101)

What is shocking here is not only the violence intended against the sacrificial victim, but the language used to describe the vault, language that roughly dispels Titus's rosy euphemisms. The vault is no longer a 'sacred receptacle' but an 'earthy prison'. It is a prison, moreover, created by the living precisely in order to cage the dead and prevent their re-eruption into the world of the living as vengeful 'prodigies'. This casts a different light on the traditional prayer that the dead should rest in peace, a formula Titus reiterates with nervous insistence: 'In peace and honour rest you here, my sons; | Rome's readiest champions, repose you here in rest' (1.1.150–1). The words now sound less like a prayer pronounced on behalf of the dead than like a plea that they should refrain from disturbing the living.

As the bloody scene progresses, the vault of the Andronici comes to seem like a grotesque parody of the Catholic charnel house. Just as, before the Reformation, prayers were recited over piled bones to relieve souls in Purgatory, ceremonies are performed on the doorstep of the vault to speed the dead within to their final resting place. But the ceremony in this case is the brutal slaughter of a human being, and its purpose is not so much to aid the departed souls as to send them as far away as possible, where they will pose no further threat. The excessive savagery of the sacrifice of the Goth Alarbus, who is hacked

⁴⁵ The passage which begins with Lucius's demand for a sacrifice, includes the fruitless pleading of the victim's mother Tamora, and concludes with the announcement of the accomplished ritual ('Alarbus' limbs are lopped'), was apparently added at some point after the scene was first drafted. Shakespeare's initial plan appears to have involved only a brief reference to the sacrifice (as having already been accomplished), with nothing to interrupt Titus's affecting farewell to his dead sons. If one effect of the inserted passage is to give Tamora a more obvious motive for her vindictiveness against the Andronici, another is to complicate the audience's response to the spectacle of the vault, and to the relationship between the living and the dead it signifies. See John Cranford Adams, 'Shakespeare's Revisions in *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 15 (1964), 177–90.

and dismembered alive and then cremated on a pyre, seems essential to the ritual. The apparent goal is to make visible on the body of the Goth the very processes—the appalling loss of physical integrity, the final consumption into dust—that are already at work in the bodies of Titus's sons, concealed within their coffins. The sacrifice seems designed at once to deny the reality of what is happening to the dead Andronici, by transferring the process of decomposition to a proxy, and to bring that process to a speedy conclusion, abridging the span between the 'first' and 'second' deaths and thereby moving the sons firmly beyond the field of human interaction. Only after the accomplishment of this barbaric ritual can the dead receive their tender valediction, in what feels like an early version of the song from *Cymbeline*.

Here lurks no treason, here no envy swells,
 Here grow no damnèd drugs, here are no storms,
 No noise, but silence and eternal sleep.
 In peace and honour rest you here, my sons.

(1.1.153–6)

Far from ensuring peace among the living, the sacrifice of Alarbus provides his mother Tamora with her cue for vengeance, initiating the drama's precipitous plunge into a nightmare of blood and mourning. Yet even in the maelstrom of murder, rape, and mutilation—a sequence of hellish 'prodigies on earth'—a special horror continues to attach to the disturbance of the dead. It is significant that Aaron the Moor's crowning piece of villainy, by his own estimation, consists not in execution but in exhumation:

Oft have I digged up dead men from their graves
 And set them upright at their dear friends' door,
 Even when their sorrows almost was forgot,
 And on their skins, as on the bark of trees,
 Have with my knife carved in Roman letters
 'Let not your sorrow die though I am dead.'

(5.1.135–40)

Part of the weird horror of these lines derives from the considerable physical effort involved in exhuming the dead from their graves, a labour surely out of proportion to the ensuing sadistic thrill. Yet the detail that Aaron's messages are carved 'in Roman letters' suggests the larger significance of his ghoulish campaign—as does the fact that he is here speaking to Lucius, the very Roman who commanded the sacrifice of

Alarbus as a means of keeping the dead in their place. By digging up graves—or claiming to have done so—Aaron stages a peculiarly Roman nightmare, the re-eruption into the world of the living of the dead in their decomposing flesh.

It is the crime of unearthing the dead, rather than any of his bloodier deeds, that Lucius seems to remember in fixing Aaron's own punishment, which is to be 'fastened in the earth' (5.3.182) and left to starve. The soil which Aaron so callously 'dugged up' becomes in the most literal sense an 'earthy prison'. Following on from this savage sentence, Lucius's final words in the play are concerned entirely with the disposition of human remains. The emperor Saturninus is to have 'burial in his father's grave' (5.3.191), whilst Titus and Lavinia will of course be laid to rest in the family vault. Even here, Lucius lays stress on the need to confine the dead, directing that his father and sister be 'closèd in our household's monument' (5.3.193). Just as the peaceful interment of Titus's sons in the first scene is enabled by the bloody sacrifice of Alarbus, so the burial of the dead Andronici at the play's conclusion is balanced by the fate of Tamora, whose body is left to be pecked to pieces and distributed among the birds.

In his second tragedy, Shakespeare returns to the vault, and makes it once again the scene of the crime. The vault of the Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet* rivals that of the Andronici in vastness and antiquity. Juliet describes it as 'an ancient receptacle | Where for this many hundred years the bones | Of all my buried ancestors are packed' (4.3.38–40). Like the vault in *Titus*, but unlike most English vaults, the Capulet tomb appears to be a free-standing monument, rather than part of the church. What most obviously distinguishes this mausoleum from both Roman and Elizabethan equivalents is that the Capulets disdain the use of coffins. They lay their dead to rest in their best clothes, and literally leave them to rot in the company of their ancestors. Rather awkwardly, Friar Laurence must remind Juliet that interment in this fashion is 'the manner of our country' (4.1.109). In addition to making the rescue plot slightly more feasible, the consequence of this custom is to make the Capulet vault a place of unsettling intimacy, where the living and the dead may truly know one another in the flesh.

Whereas in *Titus* the living shy away from visualizing what is going on inside the coffins—indeed, the purpose of the sacrifice of Alarbus is to forestall just such trains of thought—Juliet's imagination and that of the audience plunge headlong into the interior of the vault. Indeed, Juliet's dark fascination with the mysteries of the crypt is apparent well

before Friar Laurence conceives the plan for her living interment there. On first receiving the command to marry Paris, Juliet pleads for delay, 'Or if you do not, make the bridal bed in that dim monument where Tybalt lies' (3.5.200–1). Later, with Friar Laurence, she expands on this fantasy of live burial as an alternative to bigamous marriage:

hide me nightly in a charnel house,
O'ercovered quite with dead men's rattling bones,
With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls;
Or bid me go into a new-made grave
And hide me with a dead man in his tomb—
Things that, to hear them told, have made me tremble . . .
(4.2.81–6)

What is most disturbing about these lines is their nightmarish sensuousness, the vivid imagining of what the dead sound like, smell like, look like. The depiction of the charnel house is in fact a deliberate and shocking reworking of one of the loveliest passages in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (probably written within the same year), the description of the flowering bank 'Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine, | With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine' where Titania sleeps 'sometime of the night' (2.2.249–52). In the house of death, the sweet smell of the musk-rose gives way to the reek of putrefaction, the tender pink of eglantine to the nauseating yellow of the defleshed skull, the fairy music with which Titania is 'lulled' to the maddening rattling of bones. As vile as the fairy queen's secret bower is voluptuous, the charnel house is a fantasy of dark sensuality, where reason falters and surrenders in the face of overwhelming sensory stimulation.

Juliet persistently rejects the commonplace association of death with the extinction of the senses. Even as she prepares to take the potion which will render her temporarily 'stiff and stark and cold' (4.2.103), her mind runs obsessively on the sounds, colours, and odours that await her in the vault:

Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
Lies festering in his shroud; where, as they say,
At some hours in the night spirits resort—
Alack, alack, is it not like that I,
So early waking—what with loathsome smells,
And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth,
That living mortals, hearing them, run mad—
O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,

Environèd with all these hideous fears,
 And madly play with my forefather's joints,
 And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud,
 And, in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone,
 As with a club dash out my desp'rate brains?

(4.3.41–53)

In spite of the passing reference to 'spirits', Juliet's fears have less to do with the supernatural than with her own psychological response to the sensations she will experience in the vault. The roots of her terror are bound up with what Friar Laurence calls 'the manner of our country', the interment of corpses 'uncovered' in a common burial chamber. Juliet fears to know the dead—especially Tybalt, still in the festering flesh and all too recognizable—because to do so is to risk losing hold of the distinction between the dead and herself. Her nightmare is one of progressive and ultimately total dissolution, involving the collapse of boundaries between the dead and the living, between one body and another, and finally of those boundaries that structure the body itself. The imagined orgy of disintegrative violence recalls the sacrifice of Alarbus in *Titus Andronicus*, enacting pre-emptively the very processes of decomposition that make the grave so fearful.

In Shakespeare's source, Arthur Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet*, Juliet fears that the corpses in the vault will arise to molest and 'dismember her'.⁴⁶ Shakespeare's heroine fears rather that she will dismember the dead and meld their remains with her own. Brooke's Juliet is a passive and eroticized victim. Shakespeare's version resembles rather the assertive Constance of *King John*, who woos 'amiable, lovely death' (3.4.25) to come to her.

I will kiss thy detestable bones,
 And put my eyeballs in thy vaulty brows,
 And ring these fingers with thy household worms,
 And stop this gap of breath with fulsome dust,
 And be a carrion monster like thyself.

(3.4.29–33)

Like Constance, Juliet imagines mingling her own substance with the remains of other bodies in a union that is at once violent and erotic. Yet

⁴⁶ Arthur Brooke, *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, l. 2394, in Geoffrey Bullough (ed.), *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* i (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 347.

whereas Constance has an animate and amorous partner in the act—the personified Death of ‘Death and the Maiden’ iconography—Juliet enacts her scene with and upon limp and defenceless corpses.⁴⁷ Plucking Tybalt from his shroud for an energetic *danse macabre*, it is she, not the vulnerable cadaver in her arms, who most closely approximates the grinning, remorseless figure of Death. Even her imagined suicide must be seen as a violation not only of her own life but of the ‘great kinsman’ whose bone she seizes for the purpose. In her charnel nightmare, Juliet does not picture herself as death’s helpless victim, but rather in the role that will be adopted by Romeo: desecrator of the dead, violator of tombs.

As Romeo forces entry into the vault of the Capulets, wrenching open the ‘rotten jaws’ of the tomb with his mattock and iron, he imagines he is penetrating the very ‘womb of death’ (5.3.45). Death is a powerfully personified presence throughout the play, and especially in its final scene. Romeo visualizes Death as a ‘lean abhorred monster’ (5.3.104), the familiar animated corpse of the *danse macabre*.⁴⁸ In his last soliloquy, he pictures Death variously as a Tamburlaine-like conqueror advancing a ‘pale flag’ (5.3.96), as a seedy sexual rival for Juliet’s favours, and as a greedy monopolist ‘engrossing’ (5.3.115) the commodity of humankind. In relation to this powerful figure, Romeo is by turns complaining and compliant, submissive and sarcastically defiant. Yet his conventional picture of an aggressively masculine and predatory Death is complicated by the curiously tender and implicitly feminine images associated with the vault—not only is it the ‘womb of death’ but the ‘bed of death’ (5.3.28) and the ‘nest of death’ (5.3.151–2). These images serve as a reminder that the embodiment of predatory, penetrative violence in this scene is not after all ‘unsubstantial death’ (5.3.103), but the sword- and mattock-wielding Romeo. He is the violator of this bed, the ripper of this womb, the robber of this nest.

When Paris spies Romeo entering the churchyard, he assumes that the ‘banished haughty Montague . . . is come to do some villainous shame | To the dead bodies’ (5.3.52–3). Paris is wrong, of course, but he is also right, and Romeo’s relentless personification of Death is a smokescreen serving to conceal the justice of Paris’s surmise. Almost as

⁴⁷ On Shakespeare and the ‘Death and the Maiden’ tradition, see Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden: The Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

⁴⁸ On the iconography of the Dance of Death in Renaissance tragedy, see *ibid.* 140–56; Neill, *Issues of Death*, 51–101.

soon as he has murdered Paris, Romeo sees him not as a dead body, but as yet another embodiment of his master and rival: 'Death, lie thou there, by a dead man interred' (5.3.87). It is hard to imagine a weirder or more dreadful remark, spoken as it is by the sole living man in a vault full of corpses. Actually and iconographically, it is Romeo who has just acted the part of Death, whilst Paris is the conventional wealthy young victim, seized unawares and borne off to the tomb. What Romeo's callous statement occludes is not only his own guilt, but the reality of death in the body. Romeo cannot really see the corpses that surround him in the crypt—see them, that is, as dead human bodies in all their shocking vulnerability, rather than as reifications of Death—and hence he cannot see the violence he does to them (and not only to Paris). If he does not pluck Tybalt from his shroud or play with old bones, Romeo none the less desecrates the vault and does 'villainous shame to the dead bodies', taunting them in their appalling, humiliating impotence—'Tybalt, liest thou there in thy bloody sheet?' (5.3.97)—and forcing them in turn to act as helpless audience to his final scene.

Arguably the greatest violence done to the dead in this play consists in personification itself. The tradition that represents almighty Death in the guise of a grinning skeleton or emaciated cadaver crafts a symbol of ruthless omnipotence out of the most pathetic and vulnerable material imaginable. As if in punishment for its defeat by death, the decaying body is made to stand in for its own nemesis. This is perhaps only an extreme example of the violence inherent in figurative speech and thought; to make a thing significant of something else is always in some measure to rob it of its proper value. Significantly, Romeo has a special propensity for metaphor and simile. Such characteristic utterances as 'Juliet is the sun' (2.1.45) and 'It is my soul that calls upon my name' (2.1.209) are of a type with, and in their own way as invasive as, 'Death, lie thou there.' For Romeo to transform Juliet into the sun or, more tellingly, into his own soul, is also to turn her into something like a corpse, in that it reduces her to an empty case, embodying an essence other than her own.

This is not to suggest that all figurative language is necessarily sinister or violent, even in the context of Shakespeare's most self-consciously poetic tragedy. What does seem clear is that Romeo in particular dwells in a world of types and personified abstractions. This, indeed, is what enables him to switch his affections so easily from Rosalind to Juliet, since it involves no alteration in his service to Love. The apparent

interchangeability of Romeo's love objects dismays Friar Laurence, who draws a disturbing comparison with the sexton's practice of exhuming one set of human remains to bury another:

ROMEO: [Thou] bad'st me bury love.

FRIAR LAURENCE:

Not in a grave

To lay one in, another out to have.

(2.2.83–84)

The comparison seems counter-intuitive. Whereas the sexton favours the fresh body he buries over the old one he exhumes, Romeo is accused of doing just the opposite. Yet the figure holds true, for Romeo's brand of love is as indifferent to the unique integrity of its object as the sexton is to that of scattered and defleshed remains. The Friar draws a connection between exhumation and the extinction of selfhood that will echo throughout the play. To open tombs and lay bare the dead is to deny and to destroy whatever may be left of their individuality—whether by literally dismembering and intermingling their remains, as Juliet dreams of doing, or by transforming them into personifications, as Romeo does in the vault. It is not death so much as exposure and exhumation that consummates the annihilation of the individual.

Hamlet is the third of Shakespeare's mortuary tragedies, and the most unflinching in its determination to confront the secrets of the grave. The central characters in *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet* resort to a range of ritual, psychological, and figurative measures to avoid acknowledging the brute reality of the body's posthumous fate. Hamlet's imagination never shies away from the sordid details of corporeal decomposition. Whereas Romeo is swift to transform the man he has just killed into an abstraction, 'Death', Hamlet in the equivalent situation reduces the corpse to sheer, vulgar physicality: 'I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room' (3.4.187). The description of Polonius as 'the guts' may refer to the old man's sizeable paunch, but it also reflects Hamlet's tendency to think of death in terms of digestion. 'We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table' (4.3.22–4). In conversation with Claudius, Hamlet seems determined not only to remind him that kings too are mortal, but to rub his uncle's nose in the awful facts of putrefaction and vermiculation. 'A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him . . . if you find him not this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby' (4.3.20–1, 35–6). It is as if this frank revelation of what the human

body comes to in the end amounted in itself to a subversive assault on the king's authority. In Hamlet's mind, everything that is wrong with Claudius's illegitimate regime—his usurpation, his sexual beastliness, his drunkenness, his smiling—seems to have become associated with a refusal to confront the condition of the body in the earth. If Claudius, the sweaty, 'reechy', 'bloat' (3.4.166–8) king is the embodiment of the Lie, then the decaying, maggot-ridden corpse must be the embodiment of Truth.

Hamlet's words to Claudius belong to a familiar homiletic and iconographic tradition in which the spectacle (or, in this case, the odour) of the decomposing body is employed to humble the pride of pampered princes. Like the withered cadaver displayed on a *transi* tomb, or the conventional skull on the scholar's desk, the stinking corpse of Polonius is proffered to Claudius as an ironic *memento mori*. Yet it is Hamlet himself who will ultimately prove unable to come to terms with the logic of the *memento mori*. This is not because he cannot bear to contemplate his own death, but because he cannot bring himself to do what Romeo does so easily, that is to emblemize human remains. Try as he may, Hamlet cannot meet with Death; every skull he comes across already belongs to someone else.

Like Webster in T. S. Eliot's poem, Hamlet is 'much possessed by death', but whereas Eliot's Webster 'saw the skull beneath the skin', Hamlet's reflex is always to reflash bare bones.⁴⁹ 'That skull had a tongue in it and could sing once' (5.1.70), he remarks in the graveyard, as he watches the sexton toss up the first of two or three old skulls from the grave that will be Ophelia's. What follows is not the conventional *memento mori* moral we might expect—something to the effect that the gravedigger's song will soon be silenced too—but rather an expression of class-infected outrage at the mistreatment of the defenceless skull: 'How the knave jowls it to th' ground . . . !' (5.1.70–1) Hamlet imagines the various elite careers that the owners of the growing pile of skulls might have pursued: politician, courtier, lawyer, landlord. The imaginative exercise has its roots in the *danse macabre*, wherein Death is depicted leading off representatives of every calling and estate, yet in Hamlet's mind the significant humiliation is not so much mortality in itself as the subsequent abuse the deceased must expect to receive at the hands of the common sexton. 'Here's fine revolution, an we had the trick to

⁴⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'Whispers of Immortality', in *Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 52–3.

see't. Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggats with em?' (5.1.83–4)

'How long will a man lie i'th' earth ere he rot?' (5.1.151) Eight or nine years, answers the sexton, observing accurately that 'your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body' (5.1.158–9).⁵⁰ Hamlet is not looking for mortuary data, however, but for charnel knowledge. The real purport of his question is, how long does a human body remain a *human* body, after its death and burial—how long before it becomes mere bones for playing at loggats with? To this question, he has already received a devastating answer. Asked whose grave he is making, the gravedigger insists that it is neither a man's nor a woman's; it is intended rather for 'one that was a woman, sir; but, rest her soul, she's dead' (5.1.124–5). The body awaiting burial is literally no one's, because to be dead is to be no one and to own nothing, not even oneself. Hamlet testily dismisses this answer as 'equivocation', and hence as further evidence that the lower orders are getting above themselves: 'the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe' (5.1.127–30). Once again, evidence of the loss of individuation in the grave is interpreted by Denmark's prince as a violation of class boundaries.

The central moment of the churchyard scene—an iconic moment that has come to stand for the play as a whole—is that in which Hamlet comes face to face with the jester Yorick, whose 'skull has lain in the earth three-and-twenty-years' (5.1.160).⁵¹ Even as his 'gorge rises at it', Hamlet struggles to reconstruct the once-familiar face that clothed the bone: 'Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft' (5.1.174–5). The skull seems to flicker in Hamlet's hands, between the wasted visage of the childhood friend, and the anonymous *memento mori*. Its relationship to Hamlet is social as well as symbolic. A gruesome reminder of universal mortality, the skull is none the less also Yorick's—indeed, for want of other remains, it is Yorick. What shocks Hamlet most is that *Yorick*, who seems to have been the sort

⁵⁰ On the 'blend of fact and fantasy' in the gravedigger's observations on decomposition, see Andrew T. Chamberlain and Michael Parker Pearson, *Earthly Remains: The History and Science of Preserved Human Bodies* (London: British Museum Press, 2001), 19.

⁵¹ On the iconographic background, see Roland Mushat Frye, 'Ladies, Gentlemen, and Skulls: Hamlet and the Iconographic Traditions', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 30 (1979), 15–28; on the skull as an 'improper property' in performance, see Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83–101.

of fool who specializes in making fools of others, should have been reduced to such an abject and humiliating condition—unable to wipe the silly grin off his face, unable to keep himself from stinking ('Pah!' (5.1.185)), unable to resist signifying whatever any observer might wish him to signify. Even as he teases the helpless jester—'Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen?' (5.1.177–8)—Hamlet remains instinctively protective of his fragile, almost vanished dignity. It is significant that in a scene in which Horatio, Laertes, and the sexton are all addressed by Hamlet with the lofty or familiar 'thou', Yorick alone is always 'you'.⁵²

Hamlet's polite gestures cannot begin to counter the crushing humiliation of death, nor can his fancy forbear from probing into the foulest scandals of the grave. 'To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till a find it stopping a bung-hole?' (5.1.187–9) At this point Horatio, whose voice has been muted throughout the scene, musters a mild protest: 'twere to consider too curiously to consider so' (5.1.190). The precise nature of Horatio's objection to Hamlet's line of thought is unclear. He could be speaking from either a Protestant or a Catholic perspective, since Hamlet's meditations on death are doctrinally muddled, to say the least. The prince sounds Catholic in his fundamental assumption that the individual remains identified with his or her physical matter, however diffused and unidentifiable it has become. If the dust in question were not still in a meaningful sense Alexander's, its use to stop a bung-hole would involve no humiliation. This is the logic that gave rise to charnel sanctuaries. At the same time, like at least some Protestants, Hamlet sees human remains as contemptible waste matter, rubbish fit for nothing but recycling. This is the logic that emptied the charnel of St Paul's, and dumped the superfluous bones on boggy ground to make a base for windmills. In a match for Othello's agonizing dilemma—'I think my wife be honest, and I think she is not' (3.3.389)—Hamlet thinks the dust is Alexander, and he thinks it is not. Over-curious as Hamlet's considerations are, there is nothing necessarily unusual about his confused response to human remains. Indeed, to judge by the rapidly rising

⁵² Just before his exit from the scene, having addressed Laertes repeatedly and aggressively as 'thou', Hamlet switches to the polite form: 'Hear you sir, | What is the reason that you use me thus? | I loved you ever' (5.1.273–5). Might these lines, grotesquely inappropriate when spoken to Laertes, not in fact be addressed to Yorick, perched at the edge of the grave in which Hamlet has just been struggling, observing the prince's antics with a mocking grin?

interest in lead coffins in the early seventeenth century, Hamlet is very much a man of his (and Shakespeare's) time.

Even when reduced to earth, the matter that made up Alexander can be thought of as 'noble dust'; what degrades it in Hamlet's imagination is not decomposition but 'base use'. Once again, just as in his first encounter with the ghost, and when he witnesses the sexton tossing up skulls, Hamlet's instinctive horror has less to do with death or physical decay than with the enforced movement of the body out of its proper resting place. Neither Old Hamlet nor Yorick nor Alexander has been permitted to enjoy peace in the grave. Throughout the play, Hamlet's imagination ranges restlessly in search of a route of escape from the last and greatest of humiliations to be visited on the human form, 'this quintessence of dust' (2.2.298). He veers between fantasies of a pure dissipation—'that this too too solid flesh would melt, | Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew' (1.2.129–30)—and of secure enclosure—'I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself the king of infinite space' (2.2.248–9). What is as intolerable as it is inevitable is that literal no man's land between the nutshell (or coffin) and the dew, the muddy space where the body must mingle basely with everything else. 'Ay, madam, it is common' (1.2.74).

The tension between a determination to face up to the truth of what must befall the body after death, and an instinctive horror at the thought of disturbance in the grave, is not confined to *Hamlet* among Shakespeare's works. It recurs, for instance, in *Cymbeline*, where Belarius insists that Cloten should be granted princely burial, for 'though mean and mighty, rotting | Together have one dust, yet reverence, | That angel of the world, doth make distinction | Of place 'tween high and low' (4.2.247–50). For the dead to 'have one dust' sounds at first like an acknowledgement of general mingling, but what follows makes it clear that what 'mean and mighty' share is only a common substance, not a common space or confine. Though the dead below the ground may be consubstantial, in that they have been reduced to what is fundamentally the same stuff, there remain valid grounds for distinguishing between persons. Belarius's reasoning on this point may seem muddled, but his logic is modelled on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: one substance in multiple persons.

Did the name of the church in which Shakespeare was to be buried filter into his thoughts about the fate of his flesh? As we have seen, the slab in the chancel of Holy Trinity entreats the sexton not 'to dig the dust enclosed here'. The epitaph acknowledges that the poet's body will

become dust, stuff for a spade to dig in, indistinguishable in substance from the remains of other persons or from the common clay of the world. Yet the dust is none the less ‘enclosed’, a term which probably implies the presence of a coffin beneath the covering slab. ‘Enclosed’ has the effect of instantly taking back at least half of what is implied by the term to ‘dust’, recuperating the idea of physical integrity even in the face of acknowledged decomposition. In an epitaph that forbears to boast of the author’s literary achievements or his good deeds, that makes no mention of his soul or even of his name, Shakespeare’s distinct personhood is made to depend entirely on his continuing enclosure. What makes Shakespeare Shakespeare is not his oft-celebrated universality, but his self-proclaimed delimitation—not his ability to enter into every human heart, but his refusal to go a progress through the guts of beggars.

DONNE’S DUST

This chapter began with the emptying of the great St Paul’s charnel in 1549, and the dumping of the bones on sodden ground. Yet even in that era of ‘rage against the dead’, charnel deposits were not always treated with such extravagant contempt. In some cases, archaeologists have discovered, stores of old bones were granted a quiet reburial in hallowed ground. At St Marks, Wigford, in Lincolnshire, a collection of remains including seventy-six skulls was sealed into the foundations of the new church porch. Rather more puzzling is the charnel deposit uncovered at St Helen-on-the-Walls in York, where someone had arranged the arm and leg bones of five long-dead individuals in a neat square pattern under the nave (Fig. 8).⁵³ The origin of these bones is unknown, as is the precise significance of the design. Perhaps they belonged to monks or nuns, ejected from their burial places at the dissolution, and the pattern in which they were reinterred was meant to testify to the strength and endurance of their community. What is clear is that whoever placed them there was not of Hamlet’s mind in regarding the exhumation and mingling of bones as the final humiliation of the individual. Rather, the loss of integral selfhood presented an opportunity for the creation of new patterns, and new communities. These are bones that speak, and in a collective voice; were it not for their disarticulation they could not be so articulate.

⁵³ See Gilchrist, ‘“Dust to Dust”’, 408.

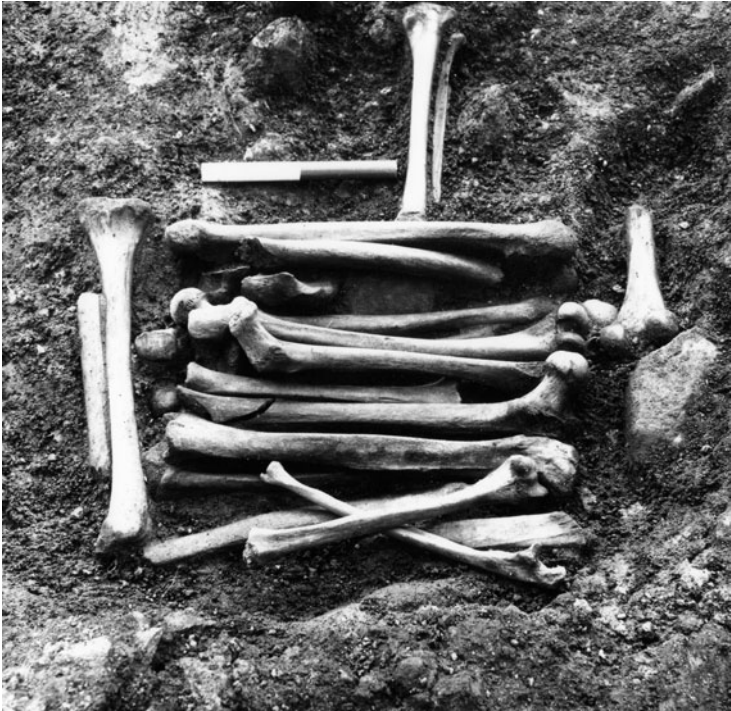


Fig. 8. Long bones from several individuals arranged in the form of a square, found beneath the nave of St Helen-on-the-Walls, York

Though Shakespeare would probably have been horrified, his contemporary John Donne would have grasped the impulse behind the enigmatic charnel square at St Helen-on-the-Walls. Like Shakespeare's, Donne's thinking about death and the status of the corpse reflects a peculiar mixture of Catholic and Protestant influences, and of traditional and emergent attitudes towards the self. Yet something in the way these elements mingled in Donne's mind gave rise to a radically different—if no less morbid—sensibility. Like Hamlet, Donne could dwell in graphic and disconcerting detail on the countless indignities awaiting the corpse in the grave. Yet his vision of the body's afterlife is fundamentally positive. Both as a poet and as a preacher, he rejoices in the peregrinations and metamorphoses of the body's constituent parts, recognizing in these processes of dissolution and recombination a foreshadowing of the final divine union.

In countless sermons, Donne subjects his hearers to a detailed exposition of the fate of the body after burial. He was certainly not unusual in his time in dwelling on this theme and, like many preachers, he would on occasion use graphic accounts of decomposition to instil a healthy contempt for the flesh. 'Between that excremental jelly that thy body is made of at first, and that jelly which thy body dissolves to at last; there is not so noisome, so putrid a thing in nature.'⁵⁴ Donne's eye is less detained by worms and rot, however, than by the point to which they tend, namely the reduction of the body to dust. In a remarkable passage, he imagines the nostalgia his dust might feel for the time when it was at least able to stink: 'first, but putrefaction, and then, not so much as putrefaction, I shall not be able to send forth so much as an ill air, not any air at all, but shall be all insipid, tasteless, savourless dust; for a while, all worms, and after a while, not so much as worms, sordid, senseless, nameless dust.'⁵⁵

The ostensible motive for dwelling on the reduction of the body to dust is to emphasize the wondrousness of what will take place on the Last Day. Donne is a late exponent of one of the grand themes of medieval theology, the mechanics of bodily resurrection. As Caroline Bynum has argued, the apparently bizarre problems debated by scholastic philosophers—how would God deal with cases where two bodies had been composed of the same matter, as in instances of cannibalism? would *all* one's hair and fingernails be restored at once?—offered a means of probing the relationship between material continuity and individual identity.⁵⁶ Donne is less inclined to dwell on such ontological problems than on the extraordinary practical difficulties involved in the resurrection of the flesh:

Where be all the splinters of that bone, which a shot hath shivered and scattered in the air? Where be all the atoms of that flesh, which a corrosive hath eat away, or a consumption hath breathed, and exhaled away from our arms, and other limbs? In what wrinkle, in what furrow, in what bowel of the earth, lie all the grains of the ashes of a body burnt a thousand years since?⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), iii. 105.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* vii. 390.

⁵⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Material Continuity, Personal Survival and the Resurrection of the Body: A Scholastic Discussion in Its Medieval and Modern Contexts', in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 239–97.

⁵⁷ *Sermons of John Donne*, viii. 98.

The challenge seems insurmountable. Yet nothing is too great for a 'God that knows in which box of his cabinet all this seed pearl lies, in what corner of the world every atom, every grain of every man's dust sleeps.'⁵⁸

After dwelling so vividly on the processes of physical dissolution and dissemination, Donne's account of the resurrection of the flesh can sound matter-of-fact, even anticlimactic. God 'shall recollect that dust, and then recompact that body, and then re-animate that man, and that is the accomplishment of all'.⁵⁹ Unlike the medieval philosophers, Donne is not deeply interested in how God will distinguish one person's matter from another's.⁶⁰ His stake lies rather in imagining the loss of all physical integrity, and the conjoining of one's scattered self with the stuff of the world, and of myriad other selves. When he foretells that 'legions of angels, millions of angels shall be employed about the Resurrection, to recollect their scattered dust, and recompact their ruined bodies', the point seems to be the opposite of what it should be.⁶¹ Rather than emphasizing the scale of the problem in order to highlight the grandeur of the resurrection, he is drawing attention to the vastness of the clean-up operation that will be required in order to help his auditors imagine those infinite seas of scattered, mingled, human dust.

Donne in the pulpit can sound superficially like Hamlet in the graveyard, gripped by a sickly fascination that will not permit him to avert his eyes, drawn to consider all 'too curiously' the degradations the flesh may undergo. 'Miserable incest, when I must be married to my mother and my sister, and be both father and mother to my own mother and sister, beget and bear that worm which is all that miserable penury.'⁶² Like Hamlet, Donne is keenly aware of the social levelling involved in the democratic mingling of dusts:

when a whirlwind hath blown the dust of the churchyard into the church, and the man sweeps out the dust of the church into the churchyard, who will undertake to sift those dusts again, and to pronounce, 'This is the patrician, this is the noble flour, and this the yeomanly, this the plebeian bran?'⁶³

Passages of this sort have led some critics to perceive 'a profoundly disturbed Donne, who seems horrified at the thought that the material remains of one's body can be so easily scattered and confounded with

⁵⁸ Ibid vii. 115.

⁵⁹ Ibid vii. 115.

⁶⁰ John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber, 1981), 221.

⁶¹ *Sermons of John Donne*, iv. 69.

⁶² Ibid x. 238.

⁶³ Ibid iv. 53.

particles of that which it is not'.⁶⁴ Yet, as Nancy Selleck has pointed out, Donne was endlessly intrigued by the body's capacity to join itself and interpenetrate with other bodies, and with the elements of the world.⁶⁵ For Donne, I suggest, there is something genuinely appealing about putrefaction, exhumation, and dissolution. What happens to the body in and beyond the grave is not merely a necessary precondition for the miracle of the resurrection, nor a corrective to worldly pride, but a fundamentally positive process whereby the isolated private body is brought into communion with others. Thus, returning to the idea of dust blowing about in the church, Donne invites the congregation to

consider upon what ground you tread; upon ground so holy, as that all the ground is made of the bodies of Christians, and therein hath received a second consecration. Every puff of wind within these walls, may blow the father into the sons eye, or the wife into her husbands, or his into hers, or both into their children's, or their children's into both. Every grain of dust that flies here, is a piece of a Christian . . .⁶⁶

This passage closely recalls pre-Reformation ways of thinking about the incorporation of the dead within the fabric of the church. But Donne is by no means calling for the reconsecration of the charnel houses. Rather than advocating a return to the self-conscious veneration of the dead, he wants to illustrate the holiness of the natural physical processes that follow death.

Everything 'flows into putrefaction'.⁶⁷ Donne's images of bodies gelatinized and pulverized, dispersed over land and sea, 'swallowed in every puddle and pond', reflects a characteristic fascination with melting and liquefaction.⁶⁸ 'So let us melt, and make no noise', he had pleaded with his mistress in 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', and this, it turns out, is what each of us can expect to do in the grave.⁶⁹ Hamlet, of

⁶⁴ David A. Hedrich Hirsch, 'Donne's Atomies and Anatomies: Deconstructed Bodies and the Resurrection of Atomic Theory', *SEL* 31 (1991), 83. On this point Hirsch is in accord with Carey: 'Even if death meant only the separation of soul and body, it was still repugnant. The thought of the body helplessly mouldering through its long years of dissolution preyed on his mind' (*John Donne*, 226).

⁶⁵ Nancy Gail Selleck, 'Donne's Body', *SEL* 41 (2001), 149–74. Selleck argues that critics have 'misread as a desire for autonomy what is really quite the opposite—an insistence on dependence and a longing for connection.'

⁶⁶ *Sermons of John Donne*, vi. 362.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* vii. 259

⁶⁸ Carey, *John Donne*, 174–9.

⁶⁹ John Donne, 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Penguin, 1986), line 5. Further line references to Donne's poems in the main text.

course, experiences a similar longing for 'this too too solid flesh to melt' (1.2.129), but his desire is for escape from the body and its destined end. To resolve into a dew would be one way of avoiding all that clammy, smelly, embarrassing mingling with other people underground. Donne, by contrast, thinks of liquefaction as a way of joining with others, not closing himself off from them. He does not melt away from but rather with and into other people. As he puts it in 'The Ecstasy', 'soul into the soul may flow' (line 59), and so, of course, may body into body. Melting for Donne is a metaphor for the very processes Hamlet abhors, processes that join us unto others, that prove once and for all that no human being is an island.

In 'Death's Duel', the sermon Donne preached on the eve of his own death, he acknowledges how horrifying the prospect of the body's dissolution must appear to someone of Hamlet's, or Shakespeare's, disposition:

that private and retired man, that thought himself his own for ever, and never came forth, must in his dust of the grave be published, and (such are the revolutions of the graves) be mingled with the dust of every high way, and of every dunghill, and swallowed in every puddle and pond.⁷⁰

This 'private and retired man' could indeed be a portrait of Shakespeare, who in his life was reputedly noted for declining social invitations, and who asked nothing in death but to be left to himself.⁷¹ Even as Donne proclaims that this is 'the most inglorious and contemptible vilification, the most deadly and peremptory nullification of man, that we can consider', he also manages to imply that it is a necessary and somehow even a healthy corrective to the excessive reticence and taciturnity displayed in life. In Christian terms, after all, no man can hope to be 'his own forever', for this would be a rejection both of his maker and of the community of the Church.

The sermon in which Donne reminded his audience that the dust in their eyes might be their own parents or children was preached in

⁷⁰ *Sermons of John Donne*, x. 239.

⁷¹ On Shakespeare's reclusiveness, as reported in the later seventeenth century by John Aubrey, see Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 70. Donne's description of the body's being 'published' in death heightens the contrast between the two poets. Unlike Donne, whose poetry circulated almost exclusively in manuscript, Shakespeare had written for the stage and the press—even his intimate sonnets, intended initially for private circulation, had been printed in his lifetime. How, Donne might have wondered, could a man who had been willing to let the finest fruits of his spirit fall in with the basest of companions, balk at the idea of the same thing happening to his body?

the aftermath of the terrible plague outbreak of 1625, in which some 35,000 Londoners died. Such massive mortality posed extraordinary problems in terms of the management of graves, requiring the use of plague pits, as well as the very rapid recycling of burial plots, a practice to which Donne refers:⁷²

Ambitious men never made more shift for places in court, than dead men for graves in churches; and as in our later times we have seen two and two almost in every place and office, so almost every grave is oppressed with twins; and as at Christ's resurrection some of the dead arose out of their graves, that were buried again; so in this lamentable calamity, the dead were buried, and thrown up again before they were resolved to dust, to make room for more.⁷³

Donne makes reference here to a passage in Matthew: 'And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, | And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many' (Matthew 27: 52–3, *KJV*). Where Hamlet, watching the sexton tossing up skulls in the graveyard, perceives the ultimate social humiliation, Donne sees the re-enactment of a Gospel miracle, which in turn prefigures the general resurrection. The exhumation of corpses thus becomes a shadow or prefigurement of the rising on the Last Day, just as the mingling of human dusts can be seen as a prelude to the incorporation of the soul in the divine unity. What happens to the body in the earth is a rehearsal for what soul and body alike shall experience in heaven, where 'all souls shall be so entirely knit together, as if all were but one soul', and where 'my flesh shall be assimilated to the flesh of my Saviour, and made the same flesh with him too'.⁷⁴

The theme of the body's afterlife that preoccupies Donne in so many sermons finds expression too in his secular love lyrics, particularly 'The Funeral' and 'The Relic'. The two poems comprise a mortuary diptych, the first imagining Donne's inhumation and the condition of his body in the grave, the second looking forward to his exhumation and the reintroduction of his remains into the world of the living. The poems are tied to one another by the lock of woman's hair that the speaker intends to wear even in the grave. For T. S. Eliot, this 'bracelet of bright hair about the bone' exemplified Donne's love of sharp and shocking

⁷² See Vanessa Harding, 'Burial of the Plague Dead in Early Modern London', in J. A. I. Champion (ed.), *Epidemic Disease in London*, Centre for Metropolitan History Working Papers Series, No. 1 (1993), 53–64.

⁷³ *Sermons of John Donne*, vi. 362.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* vii. 139; iii. 112–13.

contrasts, especially ones yoking the beautiful to the macabre.⁷⁵ To readers familiar with Gerald of Wales, the image irresistibly recalls the lock of Guinevere's hair unearthed at Glastonbury, and it has been proposed on this basis that Donne must have come across an account of that event in his friend Sir Robert Cotton's library.⁷⁶ If so, Donne was clearly not dissuaded by Gerald's solemn warning that 'female hair is a snare for the simple-minded'.⁷⁷ Whereas Guinevere's lock is a deceptive lure, harbouring only death and emptiness, the hair in 'The Funeral' and 'The Relic' is a more ambiguous and multivalent sign, hinting among other things at the genuine possibility of life and love beyond the grave.

'Whoever comes to shroud me, do not harm, | Nor question much, | That subtle wreath of hair, which crowns my arm . . .' (lines 1–3). The opening lines of 'The Funeral' are in some ways reminiscent of Shakespeare's epitaph. The poet, supposedly on the verge of dying from unrequited love, addresses himself neither to his beloved nor to a posterity composed of other lovers, but to an anonymous operative in the business of inhumation. That he neither knows or cares who will do him the last intimate service of shrouding signals the extent of his alienation from human society. Like Shakespeare, he asks only for forbearance, to be left alone. The professed wish to remain unquestioned is, however, transparently insincere (as the revealing adverb 'much' at the end of line 2 suggests). Barely pausing for the breath in which a listener might begin to formulate a question, Donne plunges into an involved explanation of the hair's multiple meanings.

The mystery, the sign, you must not touch
 For tis my outward soul,
 Viceroy to that, which then to heaven being gone,
 Will leave this to control
 And keep these limbs, her provinces, from dissolution.
(lines 4–8)

Rather than disintegrating on contact, the wonderful lock becomes the means of the body's survival. The dream of incorruption is one Donne shares with those in his time who hoped that burial in a

⁷⁵ T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1934), 283.

⁷⁶ Phillips D. Carleton, 'John Donne's "Bracelet of Bright Hair About the Bone"', *Modern Language Notes*, 56 (1941), 366–8.

⁷⁷ Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales/The Description of Wales*, trans. and ed. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin, 1978), 285.

lead sarcophagus, moulded to mimic the contours of the body, would preserve them from decay forever.⁷⁸ The difference is that Donne's body will owe its preservation not to a hermetic seal but to intimate contact with another person's remains. Since, he argues, the body is held together by 'the sinewy thread' (line 9) falling from the brain, and the brain from which these hairs grew is better than his own, they will be all the more effective when it comes to keeping him in one piece.

The deepest longing expressed in 'The Funeral' is not for the preservation of the flesh but for union in the grave. Remembering, perhaps, that hair is dead matter even during life, Donne briefly worries that the gift might actually amount to no more than a sentence of death. None the less, he insists, 'Whate'er she meant by it, bury it with me', for 'tis some bravery, | That since you would have none of me, I bury some of you' (lines 23–4). Donne cannot be quite sure whether he is foiling or fulfilling his mistress's intentions, but either way he will have her in the grave. The poem implicitly extends the conceit of 'The Flea', in which the mingling of the lovers' bloods within the body of a flea symbolizes and justifies sexual union. If Donne's body is preserved, it is thanks to his mistress's company; if it rots, it rots with her in the closest of all embraces. Consumption will be a kind of consummation.

'The Relic' begins by looking forward to the interruption of Donne's subterranean tryst by the intrusive spade of the sexton.

When my grave is broke up again
Some second guest to entertain,
(For graves have learned that woman-head,
To be to more than one a bed)
And he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,
Will he not let us alone,
And think that there a loving couple lies,
Who thought that this device might be some way
To make their souls, at the last busy day,
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?

(lines 1–11)

The apparent misogyny of the third and fourth lines is jarring, especially alongside the otherwise tender veneration of the beloved in this poem. 'The Relic' shares with *Romeo and Juliet* the image of the tomb as a

⁷⁸ Harding, *The Dead and the Living*, 143–5.

female 'bed' or 'womb'. Yet whereas Romeo subjects the Capulet vault to violent penetration, Donne emphasizes that the opening of the grave is a consensual act. If Donne characteristically associates sexual openness with 'woman-head', he does not always do so in a pejorative vein. In its willingness to entertain multiple occupants, the grave is arguably comparable to the holy church, Christ's bride in 'Holy Sonnet 18': 'Who is most true, and pleasing to thee, then | When she is embraced and open to most men' (lines 13–14).

The reference to 'the last busy day' recalls the many reminders of the general resurrection in Donne's sermons. The key difference is that rather than having 'legions of angels' or God himself on hand to reassemble the bodies, here it is the dead themselves who apparently must go about and gather up their scattered pieces. If God is present at all in this vision of the last day, it is only as the harassed overseer on a busy worksite who may not notice, after all, if two bodies take time off from their duties for a brief embrace. Poignant and endearing as this vision is, it is not intended as a serious argument against exhumation. As in 'The Funeral', the plea to 'let us alone' is the purest feint. The poem figures the exhumation and display of the lovers not as an interruption but as a consummation of their embrace, furthering the process of bodily interpenetration which had begun in the grave.

The second stanza of 'The Relic' involves a mild satire of Catholic beliefs, imagining that if the Roman religion prevails at the time of their exhumation, 'he that digs us up, will bring | Us, to the Bishop, and the King, | To make us relics' (lines 14–16). Donne's mistress will be revered as 'Mary Magdalen', and Donne himself will be worshipped as 'something else' (lines 15–16), which can only mean Christ himself. Yet even as he sniggers at Catholic saint-worship, Donne is obviously more than a little enticed by the prospect. The final stanza, enumerating the 'miracles' (line 22) of love wrought by the two saint-lovers, largely recuperates the ideals mocked in the second. In reporting that he and his mistress 'loved well and faithfully' (line 23), kissed only occasionally, and 'ne'er touched the seals' (line 29) of sexual intercourse, Donne does not parody so much as reproduce the substance of medieval saints' lives. There is a particular resemblance to the late antique legend of the 'chaste lovers', who abstained from sex even during marriage, and whose buried bodies migrated miraculously to lie side by side in the earth.⁷⁹ What

⁷⁹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 95–7. There are also various classical precedents for the idea of lovers

attracts Donne is the idea of a love so all-consuming, so mutual and so pure that it can find its true and divinely sanctioned expression ('they shall be one flesh', Genesis 2: 24) only in the grave.

It is for Donne, far more than for Shakespeare, that *Measure for Measure*'s Claudio speaks when he names the horror of death as 'to lie in cold obstruction and to rot'. Donne embraces the prospects of exhumation and dissolution as ways of escaping isolation and immobility in the cold confinement of the tomb. As John Carey has observed, death in Donne's imagination can look strangely like 'a form of life', involving scarcely any diminishment in bodily vigour and sociability.⁸⁰ In sermons and amatory verse alike, the disarticulated and dissolving bodies of the dead become lively participants in communities involving both the dead and the living. The result—in psychological if not theological terms—is something that feels very much like the old communal spirit embodied in the medieval charnel house.

In his distinctive way of thinking about the fate of the body after death, Donne is a product of his age, and perhaps in particular of his Catholic upbringing. Yet there is nothing intrinsically Catholic nor early modern about the belief that human remains can and should continue to participate in wider communities. The nineteenth-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham famously advocated the public display of preserved corpses, including his own, as instructive 'auto-icons'; Bentham's body has resided for many years in a glass case at University College London.⁸¹ In our own time, posthumous organ donation is for many people not merely a utilitarian good deed, but a means of living on after death, joined to the body of another.⁸² Still more widespread, in an age where cremation has become more popular than inhumation (at least in Britain), is the wish for one's cremated ashes to be scattered

embracing in the grave, including the promise Propertius receives from the spectre of Cynthia in *Elegies* IV. 7: 'Nunc te possideant aliae: mox sola tenebo | mecum eris, et mixtis ossibus ossa teram' [Let others possess you now; soon I alone will hold you, and grind your bones, mixing them with mine]. See D. C. Allen, 'Love in a Grave', *Modern Language Notes*, 74 (1959), 485–6.

⁸⁰ Carey, *John Donne*, 202.

⁸¹ C. F. A. Marmoy, 'The "Auto-Icon" of Jeremy Bentham at University College, London', *Medical History*, 2 (1958), 77–86. The rumour that Bentham's body is still wheeled out for annual meetings of the governing body is apparently false.

⁸² Gill Haddow, 'The Phenomenology of Death, Embodiment and Organ Transplantation', *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 27 (2005), 92–113.

over a beloved area.⁸³ Many today make the active choice, without even waiting for decomposition, to 'be mingled with the dust of every high way, and of every dunghill, and swallowed in every puddle and pond'.

A more controversial means whereby human remains re-enter circulation is through archaeological study and public display. From Rameses II to Ötzi the Iceman, and under glass in countless laboratories and museums, the dead of ancient times form fresh communities with the living. Archaeologists can be seen to perform something akin to the function that once belonged to chantry priests, managing and maintaining our relationships with the long-departed. Their work is at once a service to the dead, protecting them and permitting them to 'tell their stories', and a means by which the dead may aid the living, through the yielding up of valuable knowledge. The curatorship of the vulnerable past has, David Lowenthal argues, become a distinctively modern form of spirituality, though not always acknowledged as such.⁸⁴

The contemporary debate over the repatriation and reburial of indigenous remains, which has plunged archaeology in many parts of the world into crisis, is strikingly prefigured in the dichotomous responses of Shakespeare and Donne to the prospect of their own exhumation.⁸⁵ One reason for exploring early modern controversies over the management of the dead is that they may be useful in broadening the narrow terms in which the present-day debate is usually presented. Whilst indigenous activists habitually cite religious or spiritual reasons for reburial, the archaeologists who oppose them have tended to present themselves as champions of science against superstition.⁸⁶ Yet to cast this crucial debate in terms of a simplistic opposition between 'reason' and 'spirituality' is as misleading as to define the opposition between

⁸³ Peter C. Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

⁸⁴ David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1–2.

⁸⁵ Recent explorations of the repatriation debate and its consequences for archaeology include Cressida Fforde, Jane Hubert, and Paul Turnbull (eds.), *The Dead and Their Possessions: Repatriation in Principle, Policy and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002); Cressida Fforde, *Collecting the Dead: Archaeology and the Reburial Issue* (London: Duckworth, 2004); Laurajane Smith, *Archaeological Theory and the Politics of Cultural Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2004). See also my discussion at the beginning of Chapter 2.

⁸⁶ See e.g. Don Brothwell, 'Bring Out Your Dead: People, Pots and Politics', *Antiquity*, 78 (2004), 414–18, and the online publications of the archaeological lobbying group, Friends of America's Past (<http://www.friendsofpast.org/>).

Shakespeare and Donne strictly in terms of Protestant and Catholic doctrines. In both cases, the issues and differences are far more complex, involving competing ideas of the relationship between the body and the self, and between the self and others. Ironically enough, it is Shakespeare's Hamlet, paragon and prototype of the modern rational subject, who shares the reburial activists' horror at exhumation. Donne, meanwhile, discovers a surprising spiritual value in the disturbance and circulation of human remains. Looking back on early modern debates and anxieties regarding exhumation may help us to develop new answers to what turns out to be a very old question: *what are you doing with all those bones?*

5

‘Mummy is Become Merchandise’ Cannibals and Commodities in the Seventeenth Century

Yet in those huge structures and pyramidal immensities, of the builders whereof so little is known, they seemed not so much to raise sepulchres or temples to death, as to contemn and disdain it, astonishing heaven with their audacities, and looking forward with delight to their interment in those eternal piles . . . Yet all were but Babel vanities. Time sadly overcometh all things, and is now dominant, and sitteth upon a sphinx, and looketh unto Memphis and old Thebes, while his sister Oblivion reclineth semisomnous on a pyramid, gloriously triumphing, making puzzles of Titanian erections, and turning old glories into dreams. History sinketh beneath her cloud. The traveller as he paceth amazedly through those deserts asketh of her, who buildeth them? and she mumbleth something, but what it is he heareth not.¹

THE penultimate paragraph of Sir Thomas Browne’s ‘Fragment on Mummies’ offers an eloquent summation of the pessimism of his age regarding memorials and monuments. What vanity could be greater than to trust one’s memory to bricks and mortar, or indeed to any material artefact? Statues topple, tombs crumble, and even where they do not, their original meaning and purpose is swiftly lost, without the aid of textual testimony. The passage effectively restates with respect to the pyramids the point that Samuel Daniel (and others before him) had made with respect to Stonehenge: ‘that huge dumb heap, that cannot tell

¹ ‘Fragment on Mummies’, in *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), iii. 472.

us how, | Nor what, nor whence it is.’² Like Daniel’s ‘gazing passenger’ on Salisbury plain, the traveller in the Egyptian desert receives no aid or answer to his fruitless enquiries.

The history of the ‘Fragment on Mummies’ does tend to prove its own point about the difficulty of determining origins. Once hailed as among Browne’s finest literary achievements, the text is almost certainly a nineteenth-century forgery. Its first appearance, at the dawn of Victoria’s reign, was as a document in the handwriting of James Crossley, who passed it to his friend George Wilkin, claiming to have lost track of the manuscript from which he transcribed it.³ The text was duly included in Wilkin’s 1836 edition of Browne, and quickly garnered admiration. With reference to the paragraph quoted above, Ralph Waldo Emerson declared ‘It would not be easy to refuse to Sir Thomas Browne’s *Fragment on Mummies* the claim of poetry.’⁴ Though its shadowy provenance, coupled with some lexical peculiarities, soon led to doubts, Crossley to the end of his life would do no more than hint coyly at his culpability; and though the proofs offered against its authenticity in the twentieth century were all but definitive, the ‘Fragment’ nevertheless appears, with a buried caveat, in the standard edition of Browne’s works, lying in wait to mislead the occasional researcher.⁵ Working at the tail-end of a great age of forgery and forgers, Crossley can claim to have been more successful than many of his more notorious predecessors.

Knowing the origins of the ‘Fragment’, we may be less inclined to notice its kinship with *Musophilus* than its debts to Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’, which likewise features a ‘traveller’ encountering a failed monument amid the ‘lone and level sands’.⁶ Whereas Samuel Daniel had located his

² Samuel Daniel, *Musophilus*, in *Poems and A Defence of Ryme*, ed. Arthur Colby Sprague (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), lines 339–40.

³ For the history of the manuscript and the demolition of its pretensions, see Robert J. Kane, ‘James Crossley, Sir Thomas Browne, and the *Fragment on Mummies*’, *RES* 9 (1933), 266–74.

⁴ Quoted *ibid.* 273.

⁵ The ‘Fragment on Mummies’ appears as the end-piece of volume iii of Browne’s *Works* in Keynes’s edition, with no other note than that it is ‘*From a copy in the handwriting of J. Crossley, Esq.*’ (469). Almost five hundred pages off, at the close of the ‘Editor’s Preface’, Keynes acknowledges the manuscript’s very dubious origins, and leaves it to the reader ‘to judge whether Browne would have owned to its verbal extravagances, or would even have gusted so irreverent a pleasantry’ (p.xvii). Not every scholar has taken (or noticed) the warning. As recently as 2002, an article in a noted journal, which it would be churlish to identify here, quoted extensively from the ‘Fragment’ as Browne’s own work.

⁶ *Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 550.

paradigm of failed memorialization in the south of England, 'Ozymandias' anticipates the 'Fragment' in shifting the scene to 'an antique land' of the arid Near East. The difference is crucial, for to the nineteenth-century imagination, the lands of the eastern Mediterranean habitually suggested old grandeur coupled with modern failure, decadence, and cultural senility. Crossley's 'Fragment' participates unreservedly in this tradition:

Egypt itself is now become the land of obliviousness and doteth. Her ancient civility is gone, and her old Glory hath vanished as a phantasma. Her youthful days are over, and her face hath become wrinkled and tetrick. She poreth not upon the heavens, astronomy is dead unto her, and knowledge maketh other cycles. Canopus is afar off, Memnon resoundeth not to the sun, and Nilus heareth strange voices. Her monuments are but hieroglyphically sempiternal.⁷

Here Browne is made to speak, anachronistically, in the voice of the modern orientalist scholar. The representation of Egypt as doting and senile rests on an implied contrast with younger, more virile civilizations. Egyptian forgetfulness would be used in turn to justify colonial rule.⁸

For the denunciation of Egypt as forgetful and 'oblivious', one could not easily find a seventeenth-century exemplar.⁹ The genuine Thomas Browne did indeed ask, in *Hydriotaphia*, 'who can but pity the founder of the pyramids', and wondered as to the point of being 'but Pyramidally extant' (a phrase imitated by Crossley, above). But Browne's point is not to do with the specific failure of Egyptian memory, but with the inevitable failure of all attempts, even the most magnificent, to preserve an immortal memory in an amnesiac and impermanent world. Egypt and her 'pagan vain-glories' might stand for the folly of fetishizing earthly remembrance, but Egypt was still by definition

⁷ 'Fragment on Mummies', 472.

⁸ As Arthur James Balfour told Parliament in 1910, justifying Britain's role in Egypt, 'We know the civilization of Egypt better than we know the civilization of any other country. We know it further back; we know it more intimately; we know more about it. It goes far beyond the petty span of the history of our race, which is lost in the prehistoric period at a time when the Egyptian civilization had already past its prime.' Quoted in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 32.

⁹ A superficially similar point was made at the dawn of the seventeenth century by Richard Verstegan: 'where was there ever more learning and science then in Greece, and where is there now in the world more barbarism? What most excellently learned men, & great doctors of the church, hath Africa brought forth, and with what learned men is Africa in our time acquainted?' *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities* (Antwerp, 1605), 51. But Verstegan's point is not that nations have life-cycles and grow old like human beings, but simply that learning or the lack of it is not an essential characteristic of ethnic groups.

uniquely memorious—certainly in comparison with a Britain which had culpably, irretrievably lost touch with its own antiquity.

When the English took note of Egypt's pyramids and their contents in the seventeenth century, it was not generally in the guise of disinterested scholars, much less as imperial overlords in waiting. Of the small number of English people who visited Egypt and toured its ancient monuments, the majority were merchants. Trading in Egypt was a difficult business; merchants were subjected to semi-systematic harassment and found themselves with little to offer that Egyptians might want (certainly not England's chief export, woollen cloth).¹⁰ Egypt, on the other hand, offered much that English consumers desired, both spices brought in from further east, and certain highly valued domestic products. One of these products lay within the ancient tombs themselves. To put it bluntly, when the English went to the pyramids in the seventeenth century, they were looking for something to eat.

The plain facts of the case are conveyed fairly accurately in the forged 'Fragment on Mummies'.

That mummy is medicinal, the Arabian Doctor Haly delivereth and divers confirm; but of the particular uses thereof, there is much discrepancy of opinion. While Hofmannus prescribes the same to epileptics, Johan de Muralto commends the use thereof to gouty persons; Bacon likewise extols it as a styptic; and Junkenius considers it of efficacy to resolve coagulated blood. Meanwhile, we hardly applaud Francis the First, of France, who always carried Mumia with him as a panacea against all disorders; and were the efficacy thereof more clearly made out, scarce conceive the use thereof allowable in physic, exceeding the barbarities of Cambyzes, and turning old heroes unto unworthy potions. Shall Egypt lend out her ancients unto chirurgeons and apothecaries, and Cheops and Psammiticus be weighed unto us for drugs? Shall we eat of Chamnes and Amosis in electuaries and pills, and be cured by cannibal mixtures? Surely such diet is dismal vampirism; and exceeds in horror the black banquet of Domitian, not to be paralleled except in those Arabian feasts, wherein ghouls feed horribly.¹¹

Saturated with the spirit of the Gothic, the final sentence betrays the real origins of the 'Fragment' more nakedly than any other passage. ('Vampirism' and 'ghoul'—from the Arabic *ghul*—entered the English language no earlier than the late eighteenth century, the latter via the masterpiece of oriental Gothic, *Vathek*.¹²) Nevertheless, in its exposition of a central

¹⁰ See Alfred C. Wood, *A History of the Levant Company* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 33, 234–5.

¹¹ 'Fragment on Mummies', 470.

¹² Kane, 'James Crossley'.

fact about early modern medicine, the 'Fragment' is unsettlingly accurate. In Browne's age, 'mummy' was a coveted pharmaceutical. Throughout the seventeenth century, as for centuries before, physicians routinely prescribed small portions of the embalmed corpses of ancient Egyptians as a cure for a variety of ailments, notably excessive bleeding and internal bruising caused by falls. Browne himself conducted experiments with 'mumia' and, as a practising physician, may well have prescribed it.

Crossley probably took the hint for this passage (and perhaps for the whole of his forgery) from just two sentences in *Hydriotaphia*: 'The Ægyptian mummies, which Cambyzes or time hath spared, avarice now consumeth. Mummy is become merchandise, Miszraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsams.'¹³ The lines are typical of Browne's style, at once powerful and paradoxical, stately and elusive. Reading Browne, one is struck again and again by the feeling that no one could have said it better—a sense often followed a moment later by the realization that 'it' is something both stranger and more complex than one had initially understood. (Crossley, by contrast, captures the balance and grandeur of Browne's style admirably well; but he betrays himself by telling us too often what we expect to hear.) In the passage from *Hydriotaphia*, Browne is no more approving than Crossley of the medical consumption of mummies. Surprisingly, however, what appears to trouble him is not the fact of cannibalism, which he does not even directly address, but something else. As I shall demonstrate in this chapter, both of the qualities notable in Browne's remark—the identification of mummy-eating as a problem and the refusal to identify that problem as cannibalism—are typical of seventeenth-century references to the mummy trade, and shed light on a period of dramatic cultural and economic transition. In the next chapter I shall return to *Hydriotaphia*, proposing that the image of 'pharaoh sold for balsams', and, more generally, of human beings and monuments melting and crumbling endlessly away, lies near the heart of Browne's sombre meditation on archaeology and mortality.

'THE FLESH WAS TURNED TO DRUG'

For more than three thousand years, from at least the period of the Old Kingdom (c.2649–2152 BC) down to the advent of Islam in the

¹³ Browne, *Hydriotaphia*, 168.

seventh century AD, the people of Egypt mummified their dead.¹⁴ The most elaborate and successful method of mummification, practised on the bodies of Pharaohs and elite individuals in the second and first millennia BC, involved the removal of the internal organs, followed by a prolonged process of dehydration in natron, anointment with oil and resins, and careful wrapping in layers of linen. Access to mummification gradually extended to the middle classes, and later, in the Ptolemaic period (from 332 BC), to wider sectors of society. The mass production of mummies led inevitably to a decline in standards. The eviscerated bodily cavities of obscure individuals were stuffed hastily with a range of available materials, including mud, molten resin, broken pottery, and the black, pitchy substance known as bitumen.

From the moment they were interred, Egyptian mummies faced the threat of having their rest disturbed by tomb-robbers. By the twelfth century, they faced a new and unanticipated danger—from European cannibals. Medieval scholars discovered in the *Qanun* of Avicenna and in other Arabic medical treatises reference to a substance called *mumia*, effective in curing a range of disorders, notably internal bleeding and epilepsy.¹⁵ *Mumia* or *mumiya* in Arabic in fact refers to naturally occurring mineral pitch, pissasphalt or bitumen. There are several sources of bitumen in the eastern Mediterranean region, including the Dead Sea, from whose depths large hunks occasionally rise to the surface—this appears to have been the chief source of the bitumen used in the mummification process in the Ptolemaic era.¹⁶ The substance was, none the less, relatively rare and difficult to come by in nature. One readily available substitute, however, noted by the

¹⁴ See Ange-Pierre Leca, *The Cult of the Immortal: Mummies and the Ancient Egyptian Way of Death*, trans. Louise Asmal (London: Granada, 1982); Rosalie David, 'Mummification', in Paul T. Nicholson and Ian Shaw (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 372–89; Andrew T. Chamberlain and Michael Parker Pearson, *Earthly Remains: The History and Science of Preserved Human Bodies* (London: British Museum Press, 2001), 96–106.

¹⁵ On the medical history of *mumia*, see Karl H. Dannenfeldt, 'Egyptian Mumia: The Sixteenth Century Experience and Debate', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 16 (1985), 163–80.

¹⁶ Margaret Serpico, 'Resins, Amber and Bitumen', in Nicholson and Shaw (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, 454–5. Serpico notes some recent evidence that bitumen may have been used occasionally in the mummification process in earlier periods, when it was certainly used as a varnish (466). Medieval and early modern physicians greatly exaggerated the importance of bitumen in mummification, mistaking the characteristic blackening of mummified flesh for a sign of its presence.

Baghdad physician Abd Allatif in the early thirteenth century, lay 'in the hollows of corpses of Egypt'.¹⁷ Here was an apparently elegant solution to the problem of sourcing bitumen—the same mineral substance which had once been used to preserve the dead could be recycled from their corpses to preserve the living. A related but rather different view, proposed by Latin redactors of Arab medical treatises in and after the twelfth century, was that the congealed liquids exuded by embalmed Egyptian corpses constituted *mumia*—whether or not the embalming process had involved bitumen.¹⁸ It was not long before, by a further misunderstanding (or short cut), the embalmed bodies themselves came to be defined as that *mumia* which, in pitchy or powdered form, could be taken medicinally.

From Avicenna's prescription of mineral pitch or asphalt, European medicine arrived with remarkable speed and complacency at the licensed consumption of mummified human flesh. It is difficult not to see this as a case of almost wilful mishearing, of managing to hear what one has been both dreading and dying to hear all along. Yet it would be misleading to describe the emergence of mummy as medicine as an example of the return of the repressed. After all, in medieval western Christendom, the desire to take life from dead human flesh was not exactly repressed. The ritual of the mass centred around the consumption of Christ's real human body—and, as Caroline Walker Bynum has demonstrated, the cannibalistic implications of this rite were as apt to be graphically celebrated as glossed over.¹⁹ The veneration of saints and their relics would also have worked to make mummy-eating seem less outlandish; like mummies, saintly corpses might be miraculously preserved, and their body parts or bodily products were efficacious in healing the sick. From the tombs of St Nicholas of Myra and St Catherine of

¹⁷ Quoted in Dannenfeldt, 'Egyptian Mumia', 167.

¹⁸ See *ibid.* 164–5. As one of the original Arabic medical treatises has been lost, it is not clear whether the Latin translators had any genuine authority for their view of *mumia* as an exudate. The difference between the predominant Arab view (*mumia* as embalming material which might be extracted from corpses) and the Christian view (*mumia* as an exudate of embalmed human flesh, or the flesh itself) is significant, as the former could, at least theoretically, be ingested without cannibalism, while the latter obviously could not. The actual extent of mummy-eating among Arabs is unclear. Johann Helfrich, who went looking for mummies in Egypt in 1565, reported that 'Some of the Arabs eat them out of curiosity' (*ibid.* 168).

¹⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

Alexandria flowed oils which were in demand throughout Europe for their healing properties.²⁰ The latter miracle in particular, taking place on Egypt's Mount Sinai, suggests a context into which the acquisition and medicinal consumption of mummified Egyptians could have fitted not uncomfortably.

It seems to have been possible for some Catholic observers not only to acknowledge implicitly but to accentuate and celebrate the links between mummy-eating and eucharistic devotion. A (post-medieval) example is found in Fray Luis de Urreta's history of Ethiopia (1610–11), which describes the Ethiopian method of manufacturing *mumia*, differing from that of the Egyptians.

they take a captive Moor, of the best complexion; and after long dieting and medicining of him, cut off his head in his sleep, and gashing his body full of wounds, put therein all the best spices, and then wrap him up in hay, being before covered with a cerecloth; after which they bury him in a moist place, covering the body with earth. Five days being passed, they take him up again, and removing the cerecloth and hay, hang him up in the sun, whereby the body resolveth and droppeth a substance like pure balm, which liquor is of great price: the fragrant scent is such, while it hangeth in the sun, that it may be smelt (he saith) a league off.²¹

The echoes of mystical writings focusing on Christ's body and wounds are here very clear. Just as the burial and exhumation of the Moor mirror Christ's three-day sojourn in the tomb, so the fragrant balm resolving out of the wounds in the hanging body parallels the divine blood and water gushing from the wound in the side of the crucified Christ (often depicted in medieval art as flowing directly into the cups or mouths of worshippers).

The account of the Spanish friar brings us near to the era of Thomas Browne. Browne, however, lived and wrote in a dramatically different spiritual context. Seventeenth-century English Protestant culture recoiled phobically from the very aspects of medieval Christianity which might conceivably have allowed mummy-eating a comfortable niche. Gone was the real presence of Christ in the host. Gone were the fleshly, efficacious relics of saints. Gone, as discussed in the previous chapter, were the panoply of means by which pre-Reformation society had shown reverence for the bodies of the dead. 'For of all ostentations of pride',

²⁰ See *ibid.* 123, 273. There is indeed a specific term, 'myroblyte', for saints whose bodies exude miraculous oils after death.

²¹ Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, 3rd edn. (London, 1617), 849.

insisted the Puritan William Perkins, 'that is most foolish, to be boasting of a loathsome and a deformed corpse.'²² At least one seventeenth-century writer made the link between Catholic idolatry and mummy-eating explicit, referring satirically to 'How dead saints' relics cure the gout and ptisick, | And are like Aegypt's mummy us'd for physick.'²³ Nor was vigilance against popery the only factor working to make the English unprecedentedly alert to the multiple levels of abomination entailed in mummy-eating. English colonial ideology rested to a large degree on the absolute distinction between civilized Europeans and New World 'cannibals', a distinction which domestic mummy-eating would seem to undermine entirely.²⁴ For English Protestants in Browne's age, mummy-eating entailed not just scandal but a surplus of scandal, a super-scandal.

Yet in spite of these overwhelming grounds for abhorrence—abhorrence which, as I shall discuss, found full expression in contemporary writing—the medicinal consumption of mummy remained common practice in seventeenth-century England. If anything, mummy may have been more readily available and more widely in request in this period than ever before. Thomas Browne was undoubtedly familiar with its use and pharmaceutical preparation. We cannot know if he personally prescribed it, but he certainly had access to it, and even conducted experiments upon it; thus he is able to conclude in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* that in common with other bitumens it has no electrical properties, 'although we have tried in large and polished pieces'.²⁵ Browne's admirer Sir Kenelm Digby was a firm believer in mummy's efficacy, including half an ounce of the substance in his 'Experimented Vulnerary Potion or Wound-Drink', together with handfuls of comfrey, mugwort, several other herbs, and white wine. (The potion, of which 'a little glassful' should be taken before breakfast, had reputedly cured a friar of the stone and a gentlewoman of an ulcer in the loins.²⁶) Equally convinced was Browne's arch-opponent Alexander Ross, the great detractor of *Religio Medici*, who extolled mummy's virtues against a different set of ailments:

²² William Perkins, *The Golden Chaine* (1600), quoted in David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 415.

²³ John Oldham, *Babylon Blazon'd, or, The Jesuit Jerk'd* (London, 1681), 5.

²⁴ See Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London: Methuen, 1986); Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (eds.) *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, Bk. 2, ch. 4, in *Works*, ii. 118.

²⁶ Sir Kenelm Digby, *Choice and Experimented Receipts in Physick and Chirurgery* (London, 1675), 68.

And as dead bodies embalmed with spices, are preserved from corruption; so by the same dead bodies, men are oftentimes preserved alive: for that stuff which proceeds from them, called by the Arabians *mumia*, is an excellent remedy against diseases arising from cold and moisture. Francis the First carried always some of it about him. It was found in the tombs of those princes who had been embalmed with rich spices . . .²⁷

One powerful indicator of the persistence of mummy-eating is the extraordinary number of references to the practice in seventeenth-century literature. This phenomenon is in fact entirely unprecedented. References to mummies in medieval and early Tudor English literature are rare indeed, outside of medical treatises. The Elizabethan period offers a small handful of mentions; the subsequent century, an explosion. Among those who write of mummy in this period are Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Webster, Fletcher, Middleton, Dekker, Shirley, Bacon, Browne, Marvell, Cavendish, Congreve, and Dryden—together with dozens if not hundreds of other less well-known poets and playwrights. That the references to mummy in non-medical works are almost invariably negative—ranging in tone from wry, tutting disapproval to vehement disgust—makes it seem all the more remarkable that they should be so numerous.

Several factors contributed to the English public's new awareness of and interest in mummies in this period. One was the spread of Paracelsian medical theory. Paracelsus and his followers notoriously praised human bodies and bodily products as the best remedy for human ailments—not only mummy but human blood, excrement, sweat, milk, and hair were employed. The early American poet Edward Taylor, who was also the town physician and a Paracelsian, included all these items in his 'Dispensatory'.²⁸ Yet while the legacy of Paracelsus divided English physicians into opposing camps in the seventeenth century, the efficacy of mummy was a point on which both sides were able to agree. If for Paracelsians mummy was a repository of vital human spirits trapped within the flesh, for others it remained an accessible and accepted source of medicinal bitumen.

Perhaps more significant than trends in medical science was the unprecedented penetration of English merchants into the eastern

²⁷ Alexander Ross, *Areana Microcosmi* (London, 1652), 97.

²⁸ Karen Gordon-Grube, 'Evidence of Medicinal Cannibalism in Puritan New England: "Mummy" and Related Remedies in Edward Taylor's "Dispensatory"', *Early American Literature*, 28 (1993), 185–221; see also Dannenfeldt, 'Egyptian Mumia', 173–74.

Mediterranean in the later sixteenth century. The Turkey Company was founded in 1581, merging with the Venice Company in 1592 to become the long-lived Levant Company. In 1583 the Company set up a consulate in Cairo. The establishment of formal trading links opened the possibility of a steady stream of mummified flesh flowing out of the tombs of Memphis into the apothecaries' shops of London. In 1584, the merchant William Barret, writing from Aleppo, listed among the goods he traded in 'Momia from the great Cairo'.²⁹ Two years later John Sanderson, an apprentice to the Turkey Company stationed in Egypt, tracked the 'momia' to its source—the mummy pits of Memphis.

The Momia, which is some five or six miles beyond [the pyramids] are thousands of embalmed bodies, which were buried thousands of years past in a sandy cave, at which there seemeth to have bin some city in times past. We were let down by ropes, as into a well, with wax candles burning in our hands, and so walked upon the bodies of all sorts and sizes, great and small, and some embalmed in little earthen pots, which never had form: these are set at the feet of the greater bodies. They gave no noisome smell at all, but are like pitch, being broken. For I broke of all the parts of the bodies to see how the flesh was turned to drug, and brought home divers heads, hands, arms, and feet, for a show. We brought also 600 pounds for the Turkey Company in pieces; and brought into England in the Hercules, together with a whole body. They are lapped in above a hundred double of cloth, which rotting and pilling off, you may see the skin, flesh, fingers, and nails firm, only altered black. One little hand I brought into England, to show, and presented it to my brother, who gave the same to a doctor in Oxford.³⁰

Sanderson went to the mummy pits in search of profits, and also, no doubt, in search of thrills (being lowered with a candle into a cave full of corpses may have constituted an early form of adventure tourism). He was no archaeologist—having little notion of or interest in the antiquity of the site—though he did take time to observe and record the state of the wrappings, and the presence and positioning of the small earthen pots (presumably canopic jars, containing the internal organs of the deceased). Reverence for the dead is not prominent in Sanderson's account, as he tramples on the bodies, sniffs them, and snaps them apart in his hands. If Sanderson did sense that there was something

²⁹ Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (London, 1599), ii. 277.

³⁰ Samuel Purchas (ed.), *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (London, 1625), 1616. On this passage see Iman Hamam, 'Disturbing Western Representations of Ancient Egyptian Mummies', D.Phil. thesis (Sussex, 2002).

unwholesome or sordid about the trade in which he was engaged, he was quick to pass the stigma on to his Egyptian trading partners. 'It is *contrabanda* to sell of them, but by friendship, which William Shales had among the Moors, he having their language as perfect as English, with words and money the Moors will be entreated to anything.'³¹ The Arabs are so pliable and so mercenary, in other words, that they will sell their own deceased countrymen to the cannibals.

Since the tactic of shifting blame will emerge as pervasive in discussions of mummy, it is worth noting that the efforts of the Egyptian authorities to stamp out the mummy trade were long-standing and apparently sincere if, inevitably, ineffective. As early as 1424, a number of Egyptians were imprisoned for boiling mummies, with the aim of selling the oil to European merchants.³² A sixteenth-century French surgeon, Louis de Paradis, reported that the people of Egypt considered 'that Christians are unworthy of eating their dead bodies . . . [I]f they are taken out of the country, it is by means of some Jews, who . . . pack them with their merchandise.'³³ Even the elements reputedly conspired to thwart this illicit trade. Ships carrying contraband *mumia* from Alexandria would be wracked by storms, which would subside only when the offending material was dumped, Jonah-like, into the sea.³⁴

'SELL HIM FOR MUMMIA, HE'S HALF DUST ALREADY'

The six hundred pounds Sanderson brought back, sufficient for the preparation of many thousands of vulnerary potions, would presumably have been enough to stock the shelves of apothecaries in the capital for many years to come.³⁵ It is not clear how regular or safe the trade in mummy was in later years. English merchants in Egypt complained of extortion and poor profits, and the Levant Company's attempts

³¹ *Purchas his Pilgrimes*, 1616, marginal note. The marginal notes in *Purchas* do not appear in the manuscript printed as *The Travels of John Sanderson in the Levant 1584–1602*, ed. William Foster, Hakluyt Society, series 2, 67 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1931), but do appear to be Sanderson's own additional contributions.

³² Dannenfeldt, 'Egyptian Mumia', 167. ³³ Quoted *ibid.* 170.

³⁴ Jean Bodin, quoted *ibid.* 169–70. The tradition is repeated by Crossley in the 'Fragment on Mummies'.

³⁵ A marginal note in *Purchas his Pilgrimes*, 1616, specifies that 'The 600 pounds . . . were sold to the London Apothecaries.'

to establish a consulate in Cairo were frustrated (the first consul disappeared; the second defected to the French and was hanged for intriguing with the Spanish; the third converted to Islam).³⁶ Around 1641, the German Paracelsian Johann Schroeder complained that genuine mummy was proving impossible to get hold of, advising apothecaries to make do with the easily embalmed bodies of executed criminals. Yet the trade clearly did not cease entirely. In 1612 the Scottish traveller William Lithgow visited the same mummy pits explored by Sanderson, from which he reported 'whole bodies, hands, or other parts . . . by merchants are now brought from thence, and doth make the mummia which apothecaries use.'³⁷ And in 1638, Lewes Roberts noted that in Egypt *mumia* was sold by the same measure as cardamom, cinnamon, and nutmeg, among other spices.³⁸ While the importation of actual Egyptian mummies was always irregular, and probably grew more so over time (that what passes for *mumia* in the present is an inferior or counterfeit product is a common complaint³⁹), it remained throughout the seventeenth century a fixed feature of the popular imagination. The English public firmly believed that ships of the Levant company returned from Alexandria laden with the powdery or pitchy remains of ancient pharaohs—and this fact, true or not, told them something important about the society and the world in which they lived. Mummy had indeed become merchandise; more than that, it had become a negotiable literary coin, capable of evoking or encapsulating ideas about race, sexuality, and the changing economy, along with love, death, and immortality.

Mummy in seventeenth-century literature is a powerful and flexible trope, typically signifying something rotten in the household or the state, but otherwise malleable (like the substance itself) in the hands of the poet or playwright. The simplest version of the trope takes mummy

³⁶ Wood, *History of the Levant Company*, 32–5. After the dismissal of the third consul in 1601, the post remained vacant for more than fifty years, and those who claimed the title later in the seventeenth century lacked the support of the Levant Company.

³⁷ William Lithgow, *The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures* (London, 1640), 310–11.

³⁸ Lewes Roberts, *The Merchants Map of Commerce* (London, 1638), 108.

³⁹ Thus Alexander Ross: 'He [Bacon] tells us, That *Mummy hath a great force in staunching of blood*. But I wish he could tell us where we may find it: For the true mummy which was found in the tombs of the Ægyptian kings, which were embalmed with divers precious liquors and spices, are spent long ago, so that the mummy now in use is only the substance of dried carcasses digged out of the sands, being overwhelmed there, in which there is no more virtue to staunch blood, than in a stick.' Ross, *Arcana Microcosmi*, 263.

as the extreme example of degraded, disintegrated flesh. Particularly in Restoration comedy, characters not infrequently threaten to beat each other into mummy—that is, into a pasty or pulpy substance, like that sold in apothecaries' shops.⁴⁰ An early and unusually graphic example is found in Webster's *White Devil*, where mummy is imagined as what is left when all individuating physical features have been brutally excised:

To dig the strumpet's eyes out, let her lie
Some twenty months a-dying, to cut off
Her nose and lips, pull out her rotten teeth,
Preserve her flesh like mummia, for trophies
Of my just anger.⁴¹

A variation on the trope of mummy as degraded flesh is the description of a living person, male or female, as so aged and decrepit that he or she could be mistaken for *mumia*. Counselling to marry an old man, a young woman in Maidwell's *The Loving Enemies* retorts 'I don't intend to embalm matrimonial mummy, to spoil the Apothecary's trade.'⁴² In Cavendish's *The Sociable Companions* (1668), an old woman is said to have 'been in such passions, as she is almost transform'd to mummy', to which another character retorts 'that she was before'.⁴³ And when Sir Francis Kinnaston attempts to dream up an appropriate 'Mistress for his Rivals' (1642), he imagines a woman so decrepit that she could be mistaken for 'mummy, stolen from Egypt's parched sand'.⁴⁴ At the extreme end, Dryden imagined the possibility of necrophiliac sex with mummies themselves, to 'make love to 'em, the Aegyptian way'.⁴⁵

Another common type of reference is to mummy as a means of immortalization, usually contrasted negatively with the power of language. Mummy, in other words, provides the vehicle for an exotic

⁴⁰ See e.g. John Dryden, *Sir Martin Mar-all*, in *The Works of John Dryden*, ix, ed. John Loftis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 4.1.508; Thomas D'Urfey, *The Fond Husband* (London, 1677), 27, 40; John Leaner, *The Rambling Justice* (London, 1678), 8.

⁴¹ John Webster, *The White Devil*, in *The Selected Plays of John Webster*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.1.247–51.

⁴² Lewis Maidwell, *The Loving Enemies* (London, 1680), 23.

⁴³ Margaret Cavendish, *Plays* (London, 1668), 85.

⁴⁴ Sir Francis Kinnaston, 'To Cynthia, On a Mistresse for his Rivals', in *Leoline and Sydanis* (London, 1642), 126.

⁴⁵ John Dryden, 'Prologue to *Albumazar*', in *The Works of John Dryden*, i. *Poems 1649–1680*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker and H. T. Swedenborg, Jr. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), 142.

variation on a well-worn poetic theme. Thus we find Thomas Philipot in 1652 asserting that:

When a poet dies,
His sheets alone wind up his earth, they'll be
Instead of mourner, tomb, and obsequy;
And to embalm it, his own ink he takes:
Gum Arabic the richest mummy makes.⁴⁶

A similar note is struck by James Howell in 1663 with reference to the power of History:

Which dost brave men embalm, and them conserve
Longer then can Arabian gums or spice:
And of their memories dost mummy make,
More firm then that hot Lybia's sands do cake.⁴⁷

Part of the force of the comparison between literary and mummified immortality lies in the fact that physical mummies were prey not only to the ravages of time but to a hungry market which, some feared, would soon deplete the stock entirely. A text can be consumed a thousand times, an embalmed corpse only once.

A further set of references, relatively rare but including some of the most well known to readers today, involve the association of mummy with witchcraft or the supernatural. The famous sibyl-sewn and strawberry-spotted handkerchief in *Othello*, to which are ascribed some ominous magical properties, is said by Othello to have been 'dyed in mummy | Which the skilful conserved of maiden's hearts' (3.4.72–3). In *Macbeth* 'Witches' mummy' (4.1.23) forms part of the weird sisters' brew, along with other human and animal members and excretions. And John Donne concludes 'Love's Alchemy', in which the lover is compared to an alchemist seeking the true elixir but winding up at best with 'Some odoriferous thing, or medicinal', with the teasingly ambiguous couplet: 'Hope not for mind in women; at their best | Sweetness and wit, they are but mummy, possessed.'⁴⁸ Here the jocular misogyny that views women in the act of sex ('possessed') as bodies pure and simple ('mummy'),

⁴⁶ Thomas Philipot, 'For the Renowned Composer', in Edward Benlowes, *Theophila* (London, 1652), sig. C3v.

⁴⁷ James Howell, 'Historiae Sacrum', in *Poems On Several Choice and Various Subjects* (London, 1663), 9.

⁴⁸ John Donne, 'Love's Alchemy', in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Penguin, 1986), 65, lines 10, 23–4.

jostles with the equally misogynistic but darker idea of women as corpses possessed by supernatural forces.

Finally, there is the type of reference of which Browne's own 'mummy is become merchandise' is an example, that is, the depiction of mummy as a commodity—more specifically, as the commodity that anyone might become. This is among the most well-represented ways of describing mummy, especially in the drama, and the most intriguing.⁴⁹ The tone in the plays is almost invariably satirical. Sometimes the satire is sombre, as when Bosola tells the Duchess of Malfi: 'Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy.'⁵⁰ More often it is street smart and wise cracking, as in James Shirley's *The Bird in the Cage* (1633), where Rolliardo boasts that if he fails in his task, 'Make Mummy of my flesh and sell me to the Apothecaries.'⁵¹ In Jonson's *Volpone*, Mosca ponders what to do with the aged Corbaccio and suggests, 'Sell him for *mummi*a; he's half dust already.'⁵² And in Field and Fletcher's *The Honest Man's Fortune*, the servants hope their mistress will not marry a merchant, because 'he'll sell us all to the Moors to make mummy'.⁵³ On the grimmer side, a villain who has been cheated in *The Honest Lawyer* (1616) cries out 'Oh, I could wish my nails turn'd vultures' talons | That I might tear their flesh in mammoicks, raise | My losses from their carcasses turn'd mummy.'⁵⁴ Here too we might mention Falstaff in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, who complains that if he were to drown he would swell to 'a mountain of mummy'; in the quarto edition of 1602, however, the line reads 'a mountain of money'. This is doubtless a compositor's error, but we should not dismiss the possibility of a buried pun, in this and perhaps other cases.

The link between mummification and commodification is one I will return to later on. What requires emphasis at this point is that almost all of these literary versions of mummy seem to carry with

⁴⁹ Louise Noble argues that these references point to the genuine existence of a domestic mummy industry—embalming the bodies of executed criminals for pharmaceutical use. Such an expedient might have been readily acceptable to Paracelsians, but not to the majority of physicians. See Noble, "'And Make Two Pasties of Your Shameful Heads': Medicinal Cannibalism and Healing the Body Politic in *Titus Andronicus*", *ELH* 70 (2003), 677–708.

⁵⁰ John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, in *The Selected Plays of John Webster*, 4.2.122–3.

⁵¹ James Shirley, *The Bird in the Cage* (London, 1633), sig. C1r.

⁵² Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, in *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, iii, ed. G. A. Wilkes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 4.4.14.

⁵³ *The Honest Man's Fortune*, ed. Johan Gerritsen (Groningen: Wolters, 1952), 5.3.23–4.

⁵⁴ S.S., *The Honest Lawyer* (London, 1616), sig. E2r.

them some implication of blame or of crime. This is present even in the blandest type, when a character threatens to beat another into mummy, and it is felt more sharply in the others. Mummy tends to be invoked in—and to evoke—an atmosphere of sin, criminality, and double-dealing. The mummy-dyed handkerchief in *Othello* is not only a piece of exotic fabric; it is also, as far as its magical properties are concerned, a fabrication—the story of its manufacture is a lie designed by Othello to entrap and expose Desdemona in a greater lie. Similarly, from the cauldron containing ‘Witch’s mummy’ arise visions which will entice, mislead, and betray Macbeth. In Webster’s *White Devil*, mummy is invoked as a metaphorical explanation for the revoking of allegiances: ‘Your followers | Have swallow’d you like mummia, and being sick | With such unnatural and horrid phisic | Vomit you up i’t’h kennel.’⁵⁵ In a less sinister context we might notice how the mistress Kinnaston imagines for his rivals is made to resemble not merely mummy but ‘mummy, *stolen* from Egypt’s parched sand’. Dryden, too, when he imagines sex with mummies, is also talking about a kind of theft: plagiarism, by those who ‘Dare with the mummies of the Muses play’.⁵⁶ Intimations of crime and deception seem to creep in almost unbidden whenever mummy is mentioned.

Oddly enough, however, though mummy is frequently associated in literature with crime and transgression, the transgression in question never seems to be the obvious one: cannibalism. Poets and playwrights found many reasons to disparage mummy in the seventeenth century, but they rarely if ever did so for what might seem the best reason—that in taking *mumia* as medicine, people were eating people. Instead, while the very mention of mummy conveys the insinuation that someone somewhere is doing something very wrong, that someone almost always turns out to be somewhere else. English writers, in short, are passing the buck; blame for the transgression is being shifted further up the chain. Sometimes it settles on the medical practitioners who insist on prescribing such a horrible substance—a traveller in Hakluyt declares with disgust: ‘these dead bodies are the mummy which the physicians and apothecaries doe against our wills make us to swallow.’⁵⁷ Often the blame is passed further off, to the Moors who so shamelessly sell the bodies of their own ancestors, and above all to the Jews, who both

⁵⁵ Webster, *The White Devil*, 1.1.15–18.

⁵⁶ Dryden, ‘Prologue to *Albumazar*’, 142.

⁵⁷ Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations*, ii. 201.

control the illicit mummy trade and flood the market with inferior imitations. As the load of blame that mummy seems to bear with it settles on the Jew, mummy becomes associated not so much with cannibalism as with the archetypal Jewish sin, usury.

Mummy seems to have become associated with Jews in the Christian imagination at least by the sixteenth century and possibly earlier.⁵⁸ If there was a burden of shame attached to the mummy-trade—and almost everyone acknowledged that there was—the Jews were most fit to bear it. Ephraim Chambers, an eighteenth-century sceptic as to mummy's medicinal properties, blamed the origins of its false reputation as a remedy on 'the malice of a Jewish physician'. Chambers went on to complain, somewhat inconsistently, that one couldn't get genuine mummy nowadays; that which was sold in shops was 'factitious, the work of certain Jews, who counterfeit it by drying carcasses in ovens after having prepared them with powder of myrrh, caballin aloes, Jewish pitch, and other coarse or unwholesome drugs'.⁵⁹

While earlier generations may not have shared Chambers's confidence that mummy was of no medicinal use, the charge that Jews were responsible for manufacturing and selling false mummies was a familiar one. Ambroise Paré, the great French surgeon of the sixteenth century and himself an early sceptic, recounted a story told him by a friend who had visited Egypt:

Guy de la Fontaine being at Alexandria in Egypt, went to see a Jew in that city, who traded in mummies, that he might have ocular demonstration of what he had heard so much of; accordingly, when he came to the Jew's house, he desired to see his commodity or mummies, which he having obtained with some difficulty, the Jew at last opened his magazine, or store-house, and showed him several bodies piled one upon another. Then after a reflection of a quarter of an hour, he asked him what drugs he made use? And what sort of bodies were fit for his service? The Jew answered him, that as for the dead he took such bodies as he could get, whether they died of a common disease or some contagion; and as to the drugs, that they were nothing but a heap of several old drugs mixed together, which he applied to the bodies; which after he had dried in an oven, he sent into Europe; and that he was amazed to see the Christians were lovers of such filthiness.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Dannenfeldt, 'Egyptian Mumia', 170.

⁵⁹ Chambers, *Cyclopaedia* (1738), quoted in Albert S. Cook, 'Shakespeare, *Oth.* 3.4.74', *Modern Language Notes*, 21 (1906), 248.

⁶⁰ Paré's anecdote is repeated in *A Complete History of Druggs, written in French by Monsieur Pomot* (London, 1712), cited in Cook, 'Shakespeare', 249.

The sudden twist at the end, shifting the blame or taint back on to the Christian consumer, shows that the attempt to scapegoat the Jews over the matter of mummy was not without tensions (tensions familiar from present-day campaigns against the production of heroine and cocaine—substances which indeed bear a number of similarities to *mumia*). Nevertheless, the association of mummy with Jewish under-hand dealing stuck in the English imagination. In Robert Daborne's play *A Christian Turn'd Turke*, a Jewish servant tells his Jewish master, 'If you gull me now, I'll give you leave to make mummy of me' (the master does shortly go on to gull and murder him, though not to mummify him).⁶¹

Alexandrian Jews presumably did play a role in the export of mummy, and possibly also in the manufacture of counterfeit products (around 1625 the Egyptian and Syrian authorities reportedly cracked down on Jews involved in the trade).⁶² Yet the association of Jews with mummy-making, mummy-selling, and mummy-eating is overdetermined. First of all, in the anti-Semitic imagination, Jews were and are frequently associated with cannibalism.⁶³ They thus provided ideal scapegoats for any Christian anxieties about the consumption of *mumia*. To put this a little differently, to associate *mumia* with Jews provided a covert way of acknowledging that mummy-eating was indeed cannibalism. Yet it must also be borne in mind that the common charge of Jewish cannibalism was itself frequently a trope—a way of literalizing and demonstrating the abhorrent nature of Jewish financial practices, such as usury. Rather than producing or creating anything of value, the Jew is perceived as an economic 'bloodsucker', a 'vampire', a 'parasite on the body of other peoples' (the particular phrases are Hitler's).⁶⁴ Behind the Jewish mummy-dealer stands the Jewish cannibal, but behind the Jewish cannibal stands the Jewish usurer. It is possible then, that English writers associated mummy-eating with Jews not, or not simply, because they knew in their hearts that it was cannibalism, but because they saw in it a form of usury, or more broadly, sin of an economic nature.

The repeated association of mummy-eating with mercenary Moors and double-dealing Jews may look like straightforward projection, a

⁶¹ Robert Daborne, *A Christian Turn'd Turke* (London, 1612), sig. 11v.

⁶² See Dannenfeldt, 'Egyptian Mumia', 171.

⁶³ See Jerry Phillips, 'Cannibalism qua Capitalism: The Metaphorics of Accumulation in Marx, Conrad, Shakespeare, and Marlowe', in Barker, Hulme, and Iversen (eds.), *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, 195–203.

⁶⁴ Cited *ibid.* 201.

desperate attempt to avoid recognizing the real guilty party as well as the real nature of the crime. The very mention of mummies seems at times to prompt a compulsive outward gesture, a flinging off of the taint. The quip in *The Honest Man's Fortune* that the merchant will 'sell us all to the Moors to | make mummy' is a clear example of this reflex. (Obviously, if the merchant had a domestic source of mummy to hand, he would not need to expose himself to the risk and expense of trading with the Moors.) Such determination to pin the scandal on another (and on an Other) is reminiscent of the repeated efforts of Captain Cook and his crew in the eighteenth century to feed human flesh (broiled by themselves) to their Maori hosts. As Gananath Obeyesekere has observed, English sailors themselves were not infrequently driven to acts of 'survival cannibalism'—there is nothing like the threat of being branded a cannibal oneself to make one desperate to discover and expose genuine cannibalism somewhere—anywhere—else.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, there is good reason to resist the conclusion that the English in the seventeenth century were either 'in denial' about their participation in cannibalism or desperate to cover it up. The sheer number and frankness of the references to mummy-eating would seem to militate against this. While it is true that the burden of scandal is often laid on the backs of foreigners, such as Jews, this does not necessarily represent an intention to dodge responsibility by scapegoating. For as Marlowe and Marx both knew, the figure of the transgressive Jew can be used not to displace but rather to focus and lay bare the sins of a Christian society.⁶⁶ It is significant that like Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, Paré's anecdote of the Alexandrian Jew concludes with the devastating revelation of Christian hypocrisy. Here it is not so much a matter of flinging away the taint as of transmitting it along a circuit, passing through the Levantine Jew before returning to the European. I would argue that in raising the matter of *mumia* English writers are often attempting to get to grips with something unsavoury in their own culture—though their efforts to get at the problem of Englishness are typically *routed through* images of the alien or exotic before completing the circuit. The taint goes out, and it comes home.

⁶⁵ Gananath Obeyesekere, '“British Cannibals”: Contemplation of an Event in the Death and Resurrection of James Cook, Explorer', *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992), 630–54; Peter Hulme, 'Introduction: The Cannibal Scene', in Barker, Hulme, and Iversen (eds.), *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, 21–4.

⁶⁶ See Stephen Greenblatt, 'Marlowe, Marx and Anti-Semitism', in *Learning to Curse* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 40–58; Phillips, 'Cannibalism qua Capitalism'.

The actual mummy trade, to whatever extent it existed, did indeed involve a circuit, with ships of the Levant Company travelling back and forth between England and Alexandria. Yet several commentators on the trade manage to imply that mummy was in some sense already on board when the ships left dock. Thus John Hagthorpe in 1622 describes how avarice draws men:

to the burning line,
And Afric's deserts dry,
Where many thousands pine,
And perish wilfully;
Where by the sun and wind,
They mummy doe become.
Yet we, with this in mind,
To th'same misfortunes run.⁶⁷

The greedy quest for *mumia* draws merchants to the Egyptian desert where, meeting with mischance, they become the very commodity they set out to find—and thus become the object of desire for the next wave of greedy Europeans, bent on recovering what are in fact true English mummies. A still briefer circuit is completed in Peter Anthony Motteux's *Love's a Jest* (1696), when an Englishman catches a gypsy picking his pocket and taunts him: 'You shall be trust up next assizes, hang'd in chains, and shown for a right Egyptian mummy.'⁶⁸ Though routed through the body of the gypsy transgressor, 'Egyptian mummy' is here revealed paradoxically as a product of English manufacture.

Thus, even where it is apparently displaced on to derogatory images of alien peoples, mummy-eating provides a way of gesturing to the sins of English society. Above all, mummies offer writers a way of thinking through the cultural ramifications of an emergent market economy. Mummy becomes the emblem of an economy out of control. This is at stake most obviously in the many biting references to mummy as a commodity, including that from Browne's *Hydriotaphia*: 'The Ægyptian mummies, which Cambises or time hath spared, avarice now consumeth. Mummie is become merchandise, Miszraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsams.' Strikingly, Browne here admits that mummy is being eaten, but not by English people, possibly including his own patients. It is not the English who are consuming mummies, cannibalistically, but rather avarice that is consuming them, capitalistically.

⁶⁷ John Hagthorpe, *Divine Meditations* (London, 1622), 72.

⁶⁸ Peter Anthony Motteux, *Love's a Jest* (London, 1696), 47.

The metaphorical linkage of capitalism with cannibalism is as old as capitalism itself, and the trope has been deployed in disparate, sometimes contradictory ways. Sometimes, as in anti-Semitic discourse, it is the banker who is depicted as a cannibal; for Marx it is the primitive accumulator or ruthless industrialist, eating up his own labour force in the drive for absolute profit.⁶⁹ But in those seventeenth-century texts concerned with mummy-eating, the focus is less on the financial system or the mode of production than, appropriately enough, on consumption. The trade in mummified flesh comes to stand for a society in which nothing is exempt from commodification, in which no form of value other than exchange value stands secure.⁷⁰ It gestures, moreover, towards the dim beginnings of what we now call globalization. When 'Pharaoh is sold for balsams', three traditional barriers to the absolute dominion of the market-place, barriers of hierarchy, geography, and morality, are being broken down simultaneously. An English person is consuming an Egyptian; a commoner is consuming a king; a human being is consuming a human being.

The mummy trade serves as a remarkably apt figure for the market economy not simply because it suggests its ruthless quest for limitless extension (even our bodies are not exempt, even cannibal tastes will be catered to), but because mummy, in its physical form, literalizes the collapse or disintegration of all values into a single (exchange) value. Mummy, as a paste or powder, is the human body reduced to an undifferentiated and formless mass, stripped not only of life but of particularity and context, of external features and internal complexity. (There would be no way even of knowing whether the half-ounce of mummy in one's vulnerary potion came from a single dead Egyptian or from many.) If market forces have the power to reduce every established value and social barrier to so much dust, then mummy's potency as a figure for these forces is enhanced by

⁶⁹ See Crystal Bartolovich, 'Consumerism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Cannibalism', in Barker, Hulme, and Iversen (eds.), *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, 204–37.

⁷⁰ These texts thus anticipate by three centuries Peter Greenaway's professed aim in his film *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* (1989): 'I wanted to use cannibalism not only as a literal event but in the metaphorical sense, that in the consumer society, once we've stuffed the whole world into our mouths, we'll end up eating ourselves.' Quoted in Bartolovich, 'Consumerism', 205. For a comparable argument regarding (non-medicinal) mummies in the nineteenth century, see Nicholas Daly, 'That Obscure Object of Desire: Victorian Commodity Culture and Fictions of the Mummy', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 28 (1994), 24–51.

the fact that it is, in at least one of its manifestations, nothing but dust.

In the seventeenth-century imagination, mummies stand not for the potential of the human body to achieve an embalmed immortality, but rather for the body's destined dissolution into pure commodity. The nightmare of corporeal disintegration, which lurks behind so many of the references to mummy explored in this chapter, is captured most vividly in Robert Howard's *The Blind Lady* (1660), in which an amorous old woman is wooed by a young scoundrel:

I have heard
Of a dead body that has long been so,
And yet retain its form, but when once touched
Crumbles to dust; for aught I know she may do so too,
And I be hang'd for embracing mummy.⁷¹

In an instant, the individual—or rather, what masqueraded as the individual—gives way to the commodity, and the lover who sought a stolen embrace winds up with stolen goods (for the possession of which he risks execution). As a later satirist of markets would observe, 'All that is solid melts into air.'⁷² The seventeenth-century version of this maxim might be, 'all that is human crumbles to mummy'.

Literary images of living people being turned into mummies and crumbling to dust can be read, I have argued, as an index of emerging socio-economic anxieties in the period. But these images also express a fascination with archaeology, and with what could be termed the archaeologization of the present. To envision the living as mummies-in-waiting is to experience something like the temporal vertigo provoked by the spectacle of bog bodies. There is something distinctly modern about the instinct to imagine oneself and one's surroundings as bygone and ancient, the object of someone else's archaeology. Thus, the nineteenth-century genre of ruin-painting extended to the depiction of grand contemporary edifices like the Bank of England and the Louvre as crumbling, ivied husks.⁷³ The twentieth century explored similar scenarios through film and science fiction; at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the 'instant archaeology' of the World Trade Centre site

⁷¹ Robert Howard, *The Blind Lady*, in *Poems* (1660), 92–3.

⁷² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 1948), 12.

⁷³ Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2001).

became a source of grim yet complex cultural fascination.⁷⁴ The vision of the present as ruin (or as mummy) is often linked to a kind of historical despair (nothing lasts, the greatest achievements and most exalted aspirations will end as rubble and dust). Yet such visions can also be perversely flattering, allowing one to perceive the contemporary as classical, as already dignified by the patina of antiquity. As I shall discuss more fully in the next chapter, the longing to forge a link between the present and the distant past—to let antiquity be reborn in the bodies of the living—is a pervasive and powerful characteristic of seventeenth-century thought. What Browne confronts in *Hydriotaphia* is not only commodification, but a whole culture devoted to embracing—and becoming—mummy.

⁷⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 99–100; Michael Shanks, David Platt, and William L. Rathje, 'The Perfume of Garbage: Modernity and the Archaeological', *Modernism/Modernity*, 11 (2004), 61–83; Jennifer Wallace, *Digging the Dirt: The Archaeological Imagination* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 145–51.

6

Readers of the Lost Urns Desire and Disintegration in Thomas Browne's *Urn-Burial*

IN the second half of the fifth century AD, a distinctive method of burial began to be practised in eastern and central England. Following cremation, the fragmented bones and ashes of the dead were deposited in urns, which were buried in shallow pits.¹ The urns, shaped by hand rather than wheel-made, were often decorated with simple or elaborate patterns, composed of horizontal lines, chevrons, bosses, and stamps (Fig. 9). They bore no inscriptions, though some of the design elements, the stamps in particular, may have carried political, religious, or heraldic significance.² In addition to burnt bone and ashes, the urns frequently contained small grave-goods such as brooches, beads, tweezers, and combs—items that were either cremated with the body on the pyre or added subsequently to the urn (Fig. 10). Cremation cemeteries were frequently very large, containing as many as 2,000 burials, suggesting that these burial grounds served an extensive territory rather than a single community. A significant number of these large sites turn out to lie near to places of previous Roman settlement, and Roman artefacts were occasionally recycled for use in such burials.³

¹ See Sam Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death: Burial Rites in Early England* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000); J. N. L. Myres, *Anglo-Saxon Pottery and the Settlement of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

² Catherine Hills, 'Spong Hill and the Adventus Saxonum', in Catherine E. Karkov, Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley, and Bailey K. Young (eds.), *Spaces of the Living and the Dead: An Archaeological Dialogue*, American Early Medieval Studies 3 (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1999), 23–4; Tom Williamson, *The Origins of Norfolk* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 66.

³ Williamson, *Origins of Norfolk*, 67–8; Hella Eckhardt and Howard Williams, 'Objects without a Past? The Use of Roman Objects in Early Anglo-Saxon Graves', in Howard Williams (ed.), *Archaeologies of Remembrance: Death and Memory in Past Societies* (New York: Kluwer/Plenum, 2003), 141–70.

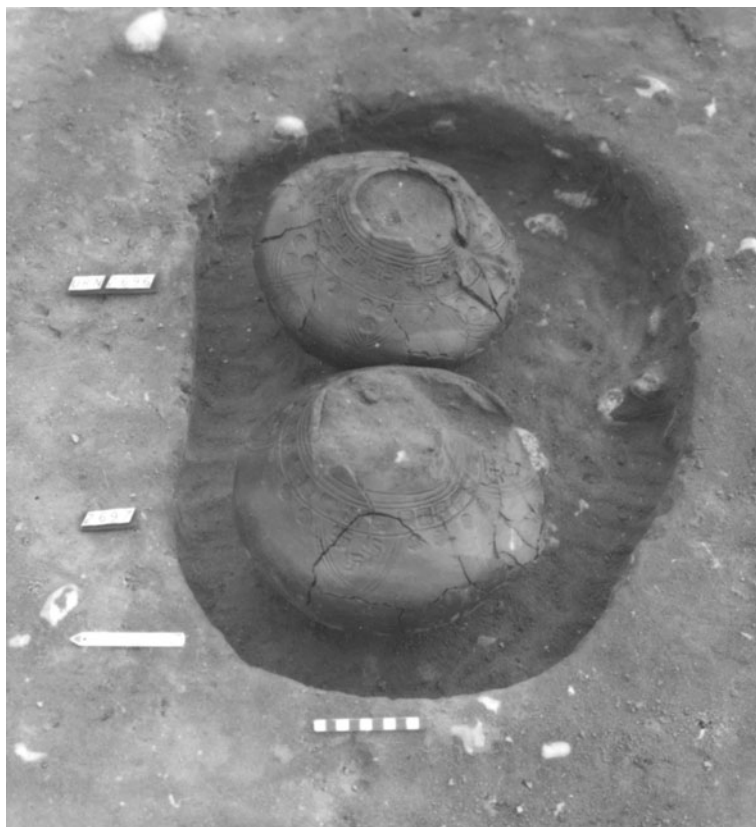


Fig. 9. Cremation urns from the burial ground at Spong Hill, Norfolk, showing a range of decorative elements (including swastikas)

In the mid-nineteenth century, John Mitchell Kemble argued convincingly that the urns and the ashes within them must belong to those pagan Anglo-Saxons who, in the fifth and sixth centuries, had swept over much of England, expelling or exterminating the native population of Christian Britons. Observing the urns' resemblance to Germanic artefacts of the same period, Kemble concluded that 'the bones are those whose tongue we speak, whose blood flows in our veins'.⁴ As discussed in Chapter 2, the time-honoured narrative of the brutal *adventus Saxonum*

⁴ Quoted in Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 11.



Fig. 10. An urn from Spong Hill, Norfolk, showing cremated remains, including a comb

is regarded with considerable scepticism by archaeologists today. If the ‘conquest’ of much of England was less a matter of actual expropriation than of cultural assimilation, then many of the ashes in these urns may in fact belong to Britons—or, perhaps more properly, to Anglo-Saxons of British descent. Some archaeologists have also begun to question whether mortuary rites such as cremation burial are necessarily markers of specific ethnic identities, and indeed, whether ‘pagan’ is a useful category in interpreting the ritual significance of cremation.⁵ What can still be said with some certainty is that early medieval cremation burial

⁵ See Howard Williams, ‘“Remains of Pagan Saxondom”?—The Study of Anglo-Saxon Cremation Rites’, in Sam Lucy and Andrew Reynolds (eds.), *Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales* (London: Society for Medieval Archaeology, 2002), 47–71; Sam Lucy, ‘Burial Practices in Early Medieval Eastern England: Constructing Local Identities, Deconstructing Ethnicity’, in the same volume, 72–87; Hills, ‘Spong Hill and the Adventus Saxonum’.

was practised in areas of 'Anglo-Saxon' cultural dominance, that the practice bears marked (but not absolute) resemblances to contemporary burials in some parts of Germany, and that it disappears almost entirely after the widespread adoption of Christianity in England at the dawn of the seventh century.

In the mid-1650s, Thomas Browne's intellectual curiosity was piqued by the discovery of one such burial ground, at a site not far distant from his Norwich home.

In a field of old Walsingham, not many months past, were digged up between forty and fifty urns, deposited in a dry and sandy soil, not a yard deep, nor far from one another: Not all strictly of one figure, but most answering these described: Some containing two pounds of bones, distinguishable in skulls, ribs, jaws, thigh-bones, and teeth, with fresh impressions of their combustion. Besides the extraneous substances, like pieces of small boxes, or combs handsomely wrought, handles of small brass instruments, brazen nippers, and in one some kind of opal.⁶

The discovery that provided the occasion for Browne's *Hydriotaphia, or Urn-Burial* was made at Great Walsingham, a village a few miles inland from Norfolk's northern coast. Within a mile of Great Walsingham stand the stark ruins of Walsingham Priory on the edge of the village of Little Walsingham (ironically dwarfing its 'Great' neighbour, even then). The Roman fort of Branodunum, modern Brancaster, is also nearby. Of the urns which were unearthed, some of which Browne presented to his friend Thomas LeGros along with *Hydriotaphia*, few if any have survived (one now housed in the Ashmolean museum may be the sole example).⁷ The engraving of four urns which appears in the first printed edition shows them to have been very similar to those found throughout eastern and central England (Fig. 11). Each of the urns combines strong horizontal linear ornament with additional decorative features.

Thomas Browne was not a prominent antiquarian, at least prior to the interest he took in these urns. Yet the excavation at Walsingham, and its literary fruit in *Hydriotaphia*, marks a foundational moment for English archaeology.⁸ The objects unearthed were of precisely the

⁶ Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, or Urne-Buriall*, in *The Works of Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), i. 140–1; Further references in text.

⁷ J. N. L. Myres, *A Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Pottery of the Pagan Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), i. 100, ii, fig. 282 (corpus no. 175).

⁸ Williams, '“Remains of Pagan Saxondom”?', 47.

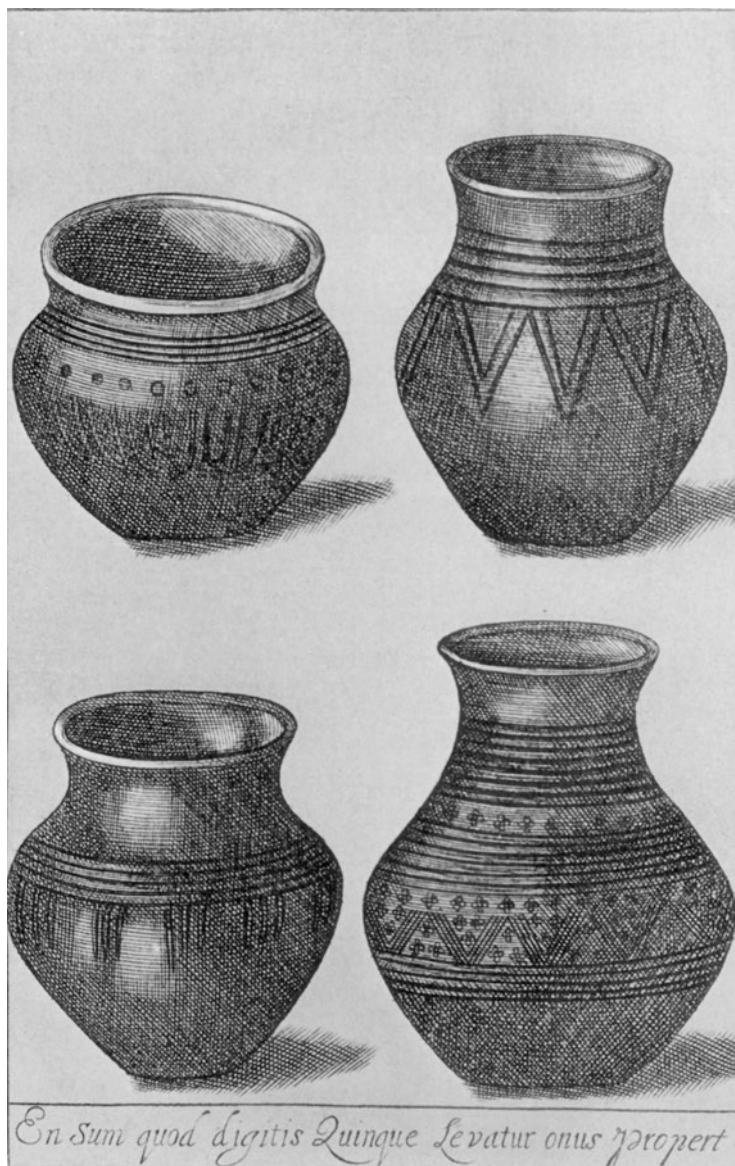


Fig. 11. Frontispiece to *Hydriotaphia*, 1658. The decorative elements, comprising linear ornament and stamps, are characteristic of Anglo-Saxon funerary pottery

kind that William Camden and his followers had conventionally treated with slight regard. In the absence of inscriptions, coins, or medals, the burial could not be dated to a particular reign, nor associated with an illustrious name. The urns and their contents could not be interpreted or deciphered along textual lines—nor could they even be safely derided, like Stonehenge, for failing to convey their intended message to posterity. The problem with the urns was that they bore no message whatsoever, at least not in any sense accessible to the seventeenth-century antiquarian mind. It is hardly surprising, then, that the discovery at Great Walsingham attracted little attention from established antiquarians. As Browne notes, ‘they arose as they lay, almost in silence among us’ (132). What, after all, could be said about objects which had nothing to say? Yet the speechlessness of these vessels was for Browne the essence of their (admittedly gloomy) allure: ‘these are sad and sepulchral pitchers, which have no joyful voices; silently expressing old mortality, the ruins of forgotten times, and can only speak with life, how long in this corruptible frame, some parts may be uncorrupted’ (131). The tropes of speech and silence that, as discussed in Chapter 1, have such a prominent and paradoxical role in contemporary archaeological discourse, have roots in *Hydriotaphia*. Browne’s place in archaeological history owes less to his antiquarian erudition than to his sensitivity to the subtle dialectic of silence and desire.

If an unusually careful excavation provided the starting-point for *Hydriotaphia*, its thesis and, no less importantly, its mood, depend on a misattribution. For reasons which I will explore in more detail later on, Browne concluded that the urns and the human remains they contained must be Roman, or at least belonging to ‘Britons Romanized, which observed the Roman customs’ (141). The immediate effect of this attribution was to open a gulf between the occupants of the urns and the present inhabitants of Norfolk, and to bring to the discovery an air of melancholic irony. As Browne wrote to LeGros:

Unto these of our urns none here can pretend relation, and can only behold the relics of those persons, who in their life giving the laws unto their predecessors, after long obscurity, now lie at their mercies. But remembering the early civility they brought upon these countries, and forgetting long passed mischiefs; we mercifully preserve their bones, and piss not upon their ashes. (133)

The project of *Hydriotaphia* then becomes the investigation of what, in the absence of any genetic relation, these ashes and the living English might have to do with another.

Hydriotaphia is not a long work, though it is easy to lose oneself and wander in its pages. The book is divided into five chapters. The first deals with the history and variety of the cremation rite, as practised among the Greeks, Romans, Jews, and others. The second deals with the urns found at Walsingham, arguing for their Roman origins, while considering other possibilities, including the Anglo-Saxons. The third chapter focuses on the actual remains, human and otherwise, found in the urns, and ponders the capacity of various organic substances to survive for astonishing periods, or else to dissolve with remarkable rapidity. The fourth chapter resumes the broader survey of burial practices, with an eye this time to how they reflect beliefs about the afterlife. The fifth, final, and most famous chapter opens out into a meditation on the folly of all attempts to cultivate earthly immortality, in light of the genuine eternity promised to faithful Christians.

It was characteristic of Browne to be drawn to what he could not maintain and to delight in what he knew he must deride. In *Religio Medici* he lingers lovingly over the various heresies which he has been obliged to expunge from his belief (including, notably, prayer for the dead).⁹ The sprawling *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* testifies to his fascination with the quirks of medieval scholarship and the vagaries of folk knowledge, even as it patiently refutes their innumerable errors. The more focused *Hydriotaphia* is devoted to the exposure of just one misguided belief, or rather of two closely linked ones: that one may, through memorialization, convey something of the essence of one's being to future generations, and that one may, through the study of such memorials, experience genuine communication with the dead. Browne would surely never have been drawn to the subject were he not himself a cherisher of memorials. Among his last works is the 'Reportorium', a painstaking reconstruction of the memorials and monuments in Norwich Cathedral, many of whose inscriptions had been defaced by iconoclasts in the Civil War.

In *Hydriotaphia*, Browne's eclectic erudition serves as a vehicle for the production of ironic contrasts. The awesome monuments erected by ancient princes to conserve their relics and their memories have been exposed to sack and ruin; yet these obscure urns, whose occupants little expected that 'the curiosity of future ages should comment upon their ashes' (131) have in their shallow grave 'out-worn all the strong and specious buildings above it; and quietly rested under the drums

⁹ Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, in *Works*, i. 16–17.

and tramlings of three conquests' (164). Repeatedly, Browne ranges examples of foiled human intentions against others of random and apparently meaningless survival. Images of crumbling, disintegration, absolute corporeal annihilation recur throughout the work. 'Time . . . antiquates antiquities, and hath an art to make dust of all things' (164). 'Common tombs preserve not beyond powder' (156). The final sentence invokes St Innocent's Churchyard in Paris, whose voracious earth was thought to consume bodies in a single day. Nature has indeed erected bulwarks against time's rapacity, but what is permitted to survive is uncommunicative, haphazard, even absurd. 'In a long deserted habitation, even eggshells have been found fresh, not tending to corruption' (150). From a ten-year-old burial, Browne has recovered 'large lumps of fat' (156), coagulated into something like soap.

The cremation of the body might seem to offer the supreme example of corporeal disintegration; yet, in a further ironic twist, Browne ranks it instead among the types of successful survival. Acknowledging the Christian abhorrence of cremation, he is nevertheless prepared to recognize its many advantages over inhumation. By destroying in advance those parts tending to corruption, 'fire makes a wall against it self' (154), and preserves the body from the indignities of worms and tomb-robbers. 'To be knav'd out of our graves, to have our skulls made drinking-bowls, and our bones tuned into pipes, to delight and sport our enemies, are tragical abominations, escaped in burning Burials' (155).¹⁰ The phrase 'knaved out of our graves' specifically recalls the rough and rude disinterment of Yorick's skull—'How the knave jowls it to th' ground!' (*Hamlet*, 5.1.70–1)—and Browne may well have been thinking of this scene when he observes that 'Gravestones tell truth scarce forty years' (166). Yet if cremation ensures a semi-dignified survival, it does so at the cost of memory. Browne deems it possible that an individual's sex, race, appearance, and even personality might be deduced from examination of a complete skeleton, 'whereof urnal fragments afford but a bad conjecture, and . . . leave us ignorant of most personal discoveries' (156). Even as they testify to the possibility of posthumous survival, then, the Walsingham urns and their contents demonstrate its profound pointlessness: 'Vain ashes, which in the oblivion of names, persons, times, and sexes, have found unto

¹⁰ Keynes corrects 'knav'd' to 'gnaw'd', but, as Patrides notes, this obscures what may have been an intentional reference to *Hamlet*. See Thomas Browne, *The Major Works*, ed. C. A. Patrides (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 295 n. 78.

themselves, a fruitless continuation, and only arise unto late posterity, as emblems of mortal vanities' (165).

Of all the forces which tend to the destruction of the remains and memorials of the deceased, the greatest is, paradoxically, their discovery by posterity. Browne discusses the desecrations of tomb-robbers, and the specious arguments employed to justify thieving from the dead. 'Gold once out of the earth is no more due unto it . . . The commerce of the living is not to be transferred unto the dead: It is no injustice to take that which none complains to lose, and no man is wronged where no man is possessor' (152–3). Some of the Walsingham urns themselves were 'broke by a vulgar discoverer in hope of enclosed treasure' (152). The supreme example of such desecration is afforded by the fate of Egyptian mummies, which dissolve to powder not by the processes of nature, but by the apothecary's art: 'Misraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsams' (168). Wherever human beings have contrived to foil the natural processes of decomposition, later generations will be on hand to finish the job.

Yet it is not only the greed of grave-robbers and merchants that hastens the final disintegration of the dead. Antiquarians and collectors, armed with the best intentions, cannot help doing likewise. Archaeologists today are all too conscious of the destruction that attends every act of archaeological recovery. The urns which emerged from the ground of Walsingham unbroken were distributed around the county among gentlemen of antiquarian inclination. Out of the forty or fifty, one at most is thought to survive; the precise site of the Anglo-Saxon cemetery was not recorded and remains unknown. These amateur gentlemen can hardly be blamed for their shortcomings as archaeologists. But what Browne himself saw clearly is that the discovery of the urns marked the end of their extraordinary, silent survival. The suspended process of dissolution could now complete its work. Among the contents of the urns were small bronze artefacts which were admired for their 'freedom from rust, and ill savour; . . . but now exposed unto the piercing atoms of air; in the space of a few months, they begin to spot and betray their green entrails' (150).

Browne more than once observes that no 'lamps' were found keeping company with the silent urns. The reader is thereby reminded of the many reports current in the period of classical tombs illuminated by

ever-burning lamps.¹¹ Probably the best known such story is that of Tullia's lamp, which seems to sum up the archaeological pessimism of *Hydriotaphia*. In 1485 the perfectly preserved body of a Roman lady, identified as Cicero's daughter Tullia, had been discovered in a tomb on the Appian Way and put on public display in Rome.¹² Within a few days the corpse was showing signs of accelerated decomposition and had to be hastily removed from view. Later accounts heighten the sense of loss by adding the dramatic detail that the tomb was lit by a lamp that had apparently been burning continually for more than 1,500 years. On exposure to the outside atmosphere, it immediately went out. The motif of the extinguished lamp recalls examples of physical annihilation such as the disintegration of Guinevere's hair, but the loss entailed in the dying of the light is, if anything, still more wrenching—whereas the hair only *appeared* alive, the flame really was. By the same token, the culpability of the excavators is still more apparent. The tale of Tullia's lamp fed the imagination of John Donne, who referred to it in his preaching as well as poetry, and that of Thomas Browne, who recalls the story in *Pseudodoxica Epidemica*.¹³ In *Christian Morals* he adverts to the similar lamp of Olybius, 'which after many hundred years was found burning under ground, and went out as soon as the air came to it'.¹⁴ Significantly, it is air—normally regarded as the preserver of both life and flame—that extinguishes the sepulchral light, just as 'the piercing atoms of air' bring destruction to the bronze artefacts found within the urns.

In its conclusions, *Hydriotaphia* is profoundly pessimistic, both about the possibility of memorialization and about the ability of the living to recover true and meaningful messages from the dead. Even where monuments are permitted to survive, and even where the desires of

¹¹ See Edward Jorden, *A Discourse of Naturall Bathes, and Minerall Waters* (London, 1633), 26–7; Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 56–7.

¹² See Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*, 57–63. The event is corroborated by at least a dozen contemporary accounts.

¹³ In a Christmas sermon of 1621, Donne observes that 'we have had in our age experience, in some casual openings of ancient vaults, of finding such lights, as were kindled, (as appeared by their inscriptions) fifteen or sixteen hundred years before; but as soon as that light comes to our light, it vanishes.' *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), iii. 357. See also the reference to Tullia's lamp in Donne's 'Eclogue 1613. December 26', celebrating the marriage of the Earl of Somerset and Frances Howard. Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxica Epidemica*, in *Works*, ii. 230.

¹⁴ Thomas Browne, *Christian Morals*, in *Works*, i. 283.

the dead are compatible with those of the living, the former seeking to live in memory and the latter to remember, the result is always ironic failure. Sometimes the sheer frenzy of the dead to perpetuate their memories in multiple ways results in an obstacle to knowledge. 'The variety of monuments hath often obscured true graves: and cenotaphs confounded sepulchres' (152). Moreover, and still more pessimistically, Browne recognizes that those rare instances where memorialization has apparently been successful still constitute failures on a deeper level, satisfying neither the desires of the dead nor the curiosity of the living.

To be read by bare inscriptions like many in Gruter, to hope for eternity by enigmatical epithets, or first letters of our names, to be studied by antiquaries, who we were, and have new names given us like many of the mummies, are cold consolations unto the students of perpetuity, even by everlasting languages. (166–7)

This passage, wherein Browne contemplates his own death and his potential posthumous life in memory, implicitly raises the question of what kind of memorialization would be anything more than a cold consolation. When I express the wish to be remembered, what am I in fact saying? What form of remembrance could satisfy this desire? The answer, surely, is that what I seek to extend into the future is some memory of my *self*, my self as I myself have known it, something not be reckoned up in a mere name or a physical reconstruction, nor even in a record of my actions. And this, as Browne sees clearly, is really nothing other than the yearning for immortality:

To live indeed is to be again our selves, which being not only an hope but an evidence in noble believers; 'Tis all one to lie in St. Innocent's churchyard, as in the sands of Egypt: Ready to be anything, in the ecstasy of being ever, and as content with six foot as with the Moles of Adrianus. (171)

What then, of earthly memorials, and what of archaeology? Browne's belief in the soul's immortality did not in itself preclude recognizing a spiritually valid role for funeral monuments and antiquarian activity. Indeed, earlier antiquarians, such as John Weever, had been at pains to prove 'the burial of the dead, a work acceptable unto God'—why would the God of the Old Testament have punished the wicked by denying them sepulture, if tombs were not good in his eyes?¹⁵ For Browne, however, the quest to be remembered on earth carries no intimation of

¹⁵ John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (London, 1631), 18.

the divine, nor may antiquarianism imitate divinity. Rather, they are twin follies, however delightful, and they ironize each other mutually.¹⁶ The problem is not simply that the living and the dead can never obtain perfect knowledge of one another in the temporal world, despite the best intentions on both sides. It is rather that their intentions are in fact antagonistic. What the dead would wish to have remembered of themselves is never what the living wish to know. The interment of coins, cherished by antiquarians, provides a salutary example:

That they buried a piece of money with them as a fee of the Elysian Ferryman, was a practise full of folly. But the ancient custom of placing coins in considerable urns, and the present practise of burying medals in the noble foundations of Europe, are laudable ways of historical discoveries, in actions, persons, chronologies; and posterity will applaud them. (160)

Here, the desire of the archaeologist cuts across the desire of the deceased as surely as the archaeologist's trowel cuts across the gravesite. The success of one project requires and cements the final failure of the other.¹⁷

ROMAN OR ANGLO-SAXON? THE POLITICS OF ATTRIBUTION

By the time it reaches its majestic conclusion, *Hydriotaphia* has travelled a great distance from Walsingham, into realms of contemplation rarely frequented by antiquarians or archaeologists in their professional

¹⁶ Browne seems to have been drawn to antiquarianism as much by his delight in insoluble puzzles as by a thirst for knowledge. As he wrote smilingly to William Dugdale (1659), 'many things prove obscure in subterraneous discovery . . . In a churchyard of this city an oaken billet was found in a coffin. About 5 years ago an humorous man of this country, after his death and according to his own desire, was wrapped up in the horned hide of an ox, & so buried. Now when the memory hereof is past, how this may hereafter confound the discoverers, & what conjectures may arise thereof, it is not easy to conjecture.' *Works*, iv, 325. For Clare Preston, a delight in oddments and insoluble puzzles is part of Browne's inheritance from Camden. See her *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 123–54.

¹⁷ As Howard Williams notes, it is 'ironic that given the fact that archaeologists constantly dig up, record, and publish the material remains of death and mortality from the past, the key questions of how past populations engaged with their mortality and attempted to deal with, and commemorate their dead, are rarely addressed'. 'Introduction: The Archaeology of Death, Memory, and Material Culture', in *Archaeologies of Remembrance*, 5.

capacity. Browne's subject, finally, is not a group of forty or fifty ancient urns, but the tragi-comic plight of mortal beings in a temporal world. Nevertheless, the philosophical edifice of *Hydriotaphia* must still be said to rest on that fragile foundation of fired clay and burnt bone unearthed in a Norfolk field. And this is to say that it rests on a mistake, if it is not a conscious misattribution. Browne thought, or said he thought, that the urns were Roman. In fact they were Anglo-Saxon. Set against the broader concerns of the text, the misdating appears almost trivial; yet, I will argue, it is both crucial to Browne's argument and indicative of his underlying agenda.

To chide Browne for his error in dating the urns may seem absurdly unfair, given that he had no archaeological experience and, more to the point, that even the most expert antiquarians of his day invariably attributed such finds to Roman makers.¹⁸ Not until the closing years of the eighteenth century would excavators begin to identify burial sites as Anglo-Saxon.¹⁹ Yet, perhaps precisely because of his lack of experience as an antiquary, Browne came closer than any of his contemporaries to divining the real origin of these objects. That he found strong reason to suspect their true nature is evident from the text itself. Midway through the second chapter, having already made the case for a Roman origin, Browne raises a doubt:

Some men considering the contents of these urns, lasting pieces and toys included in them, and the custom of burning with many other nations, might somewhat doubt whether all urns found among us, were properly Roman relics, or some not belonging unto our British, Saxon, or Danish forefathers. (145)

That burning the dead was used in Sarmatia, is affirmed by Gaguinus, that the Sueons and Gothlanders used to burn their princes and great persons, is delivered by Saxo and Olaus; that this was the old German practise, is also asserted by Tacitus. And though we are bare in historical particulars of such obsequies in this island, or that the Saxons, Jutes, and Angles burnt their dead, yet came they from parts where 'twas of ancient practise; the Germans

¹⁸ Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 251. In Germany, similar urns had been identified by the sixteenth century as the work of pre-Christian Teutonic tribes; yet there were others who seriously contended that they were natural productions of the earth, or the handiwork of subterranean dwarves. See Alain Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past: The Origins of Archaeology*, trans. Ian Kinnes and Gillian Varndell (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 142–8; John Mitchell Kemble, *Horae Ferales*, ed. R. G. Latham and A. W. Franks (London: Lovell, Reeve & Co., 1863), 86.

¹⁹ Lucy, *The Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 6–8.

using it, from whom they were descended. And even in Jutland and Sleswick in Anglia Cymbrica, urns with bones were found not many years before us. (146)

In addition to recognizing the likelihood that England's early Germanic settlers practised cremation and urn-burial, Browne knew that the site of the excavation had been a settlement of the Anglo-Saxons, 'in whose thin-fill'd maps we yet find the name of Walsingham' (141).

On the other side of the question, Browne notes that two sites of Roman occupation lie in the immediate vicinity, and guesses correctly that the Anglo-Saxons often settled near older population centres. Yet in addition to adducing evidence that might support a Germanic attribution, he admits to reasons for doubting that the urns are Roman. He knew, from both classical and antiquarian sources, and possibly from items in the collections of friends, what a real Roman cremation burial should look like. In later years he would inspect and describe such a gravesite himself, when another set of urns was unearthed at the Roman site of Brampton in Norfolk; here he encountered smooth, wheel-made pottery bearing Latin inscriptions, containing the coins of various emperors, and surrounded by fine glass vessels which had once held wine or tears.²⁰ By contrast, Browne can only wonder at the crudity of the Walsingham finds, bereft of inscriptions and attended by 'No lamps, included liquors, lachrymatories, or tear-bottles' (149).²¹ If they are indeed Roman, then the ashes within them must belong to very rustic, unsophisticated citizens of the Empire.

The evidence actually presented within *Hydriotaphia* is fairly balanced. On the Anglo-Saxon side, there is the fact of cremation burial having been practised by their Germanic ancestors and contemporaries, and the failure of the urns to match either classical descriptions or surviving Roman pottery. For the Romans, there is the certainty that

²⁰ Thomas Browne, 'Concerning Some Urnes Found in Brampton Field in Norfolk, 1667', in *Works*, i. 233–8.

²¹ The absence of alcoholic offerings saddens Browne in particular, leaving him to speculate wistfully as to the flavour of such an ancient vintage, 'Liquors not to be computed by years of annual magistrates, but by great conjunctions and the fatal periods of kingdoms' (149). According to Preston, 'the thought of mortuary liquors distracts him from a correct Saxon conclusion'. *Thomas Browne and the Writing of Early Modern Science*, 150. The fantasy of actually drinking Roman wine might seem to run against Browne's conviction that the living cannot have a genuine experience of the past. But Browne does not imagine that such ancient liquors, having matured for a millennium in the tomb, would taste as they did to Roman lips. It is their antiquity, not their original essence, that he longs to savour.

they did practise cremation in Britain, and the weight of antiquarian convention. The location of the find itself could support either attribution. Yet Browne is not really concerned with weighing the evidence. He takes it as given from the start that the urns are Roman. It is perfectly possible that he was led to this conclusion simply on the basis of the facts available to him. Yet he was not blind to the very different implications and connotations involved in one attribution or the other, and it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the consideration of various extra-archaeological factors helped to sway his mind.

As Graham Parry has noted, without directly accusing the author of hypocrisy, 'It is important to Browne that the urns should be Roman.'²² The attribution gives him licence to delve into the traditions and atmosphere of antiquity, which underlie so much of *Hydriotaphia*'s grandeur and mystery. Moreover, and more importantly I believe, it allows him to distance these human remains from any living inhabitants of the island of Britain. In this respect, the Walsingham find presents a very different case from the famous exhumation of Arthur and Guinevere at Glastonbury, to which Browne refers in the dedication: 'When the bones of King Arthur were digged up, the old race might think, they beheld therein some originals of themselves; unto these of our urns none here can pretend relation . . .' (132–3). Browne recognizes that in the twelfth century, and in the seventeenth, Arthur's long-dead body could still speak to living bodies on a physical, indeed genetic level—for the Welsh ('the old race') he was flesh of their flesh, 'one of us'. His bones remained unsettlingly topical, in both senses of the word—relevant to the present time, and belonging in a deep way to the place. Whether or not it was engineered by the English for political purposes, the exhumation of Arthur testifies to the power of human remains to retain a kind of cultural energy, even a capacity for intervention, across many subterranean centuries. In the first pages of *Hydriotaphia*, Browne seems to recognize this power and to shy sharply away from it by asserting the Roman origin of the urns. Assuming, rather implausibly, that the Romans left no genetic mark on Britain, he refuses to the burnt bones of Walsingham the possibility of participating in the communities of the present day.

This opening manoeuvre demands our attention in part because it is one that Browne would repeat more than once in his subsequent antiquarian work. Responding to a query from William Dugdale on the origins of the 'Artificial Hills, Mounts or Burrows [barrows] in many parts of

²² Parry, *The Trophies of Time*, 251.

England', Browne takes care to stress that 'they are not appropriable unto any of the three nations of the Romans, Saxons, or Danes, who, after the Britons, have possessed this land; because upon strict account, they may be applicable to them all.'²³ That the barrows should be preserved from appropriation by any one nation is a matter of particular importance, since monuments of this kind do not simply represent an ancient claim to the land—they are effectively one with the land itself, 'and are like to have the same period with the Earth'.²⁴ When Browne turns to the study of languages, he is similarly at pains to deny to any nation sole propriety over its own speech. '[N]o languages have been so straitly lock'd up as not to admit of commixture'—Welsh incorporates elements of Latin, Greek and Saxon; Basque of Latin and Castilian; English, while still resting on its Saxon foundations, 'swell[s] with the inmates of Italian, French and Latin'.²⁵ In these later writings, as in *Hydriotaphia*, Browne takes care to keep the objects of his antiquarian study safe from the proprietary claims of a single ethnic group. The difference is that while in the later writings he evades this prospect by insisting on common practices and commixture, in *Hydriotaphia* he establishes an unbridgeable gulf between the objects and any living community.

There can be little doubt that had the Walsingham burials been correctly identified as Anglo-Saxon, many of Browne's contemporaries would have been quick to recognize in them 'some originals of themselves'. The inhabitants of Norfolk and of most of England were prone to regard themselves as genetic descendants of the Anglo-Saxons, with perhaps some later Danish admixture. Moreover, it was increasingly acknowledged in the seventeenth century that not only the blood of the English but their customs, institutions, and language derived largely from those Germanic settlers.²⁶ The unprecedented discovery of an

²³ Browne, *Works*, iii. 84–5. ²⁴ *Ibid.* 87.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 74, 76. Browne does take pleasure in demonstrating that it is still possible to write intelligibly in English using only Saxon words, but the difference between the drab style of this exercise ('The first and foremost step to all good works is the dread and fear of the Lord of Heaven and Earth . . .' (76–7)) and Browne's more accustomed and celebrated style, stuffed with Latinate and Greek terms and coinages ('if any have been so happy as truly to understand Christian annihilation, extasis, exolution, liquefaction, transformation, the kisse of the Spouse, the gustation of God, and ingression into the divine shadow, they have already had a handsome anticipation of heaven . . .' (*Hydriotaphia*, 170)) is telling indeed.

²⁶ See Colin Kidd, *British Identities Before Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Christopher Hill, 'The Norman Yoke', in *Puritanism and Revolution* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958), 46–111; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957);

Anglo-Saxon burial ground could well have become a national cause célèbre, comparable in some respects to the recent discovery of the tomb of the Frankish King Childeric at Tournai in 1653.²⁷ If Browne had simply wished to garner maximum attention for the Walsingham find, identifying the urns as Anglo-Saxon should have helped his cause. But the acceptance of an Anglo-Saxon attribution would also have led him almost unavoidably into a realm of historical controversy which would sit very uneasily with his thesis in *Hydriotaphia*, and with his deeper political and religious instincts.

About the life and customs of the pagan Anglo-Saxons, scholars of the seventeenth century knew very little indeed, beyond what could be inferred from Roman and antiquarian accounts of the ancient Germans. Their brief historical career in England was understood almost exclusively with reference to its beginning and its end. Their term had begun in a genocidal war against the native Britons, who were believed to have been driven west or exterminated by the invaders, and had closed at the end of the sixth century with their conversion to Christianity at the hands of the papal emissary, Augustine. When it came to dating the urns, these two events would have provided Browne with a *terminus a quo* (c.450) and *terminus ad quem* (c.600) somewhat more precise than anything the Roman attribution allowed him. However, Browne would have found it difficult to say anything of substance about the occupants of the urns without referring to these historical *termini*—and both events had long held a highly problematic role in English history.

In Browne's time, the matter of the Anglo-Saxon conquest of England no longer provoked the bitter denunciations it had in the Tudor era, when the reputation of the conquerors was at its nadir.²⁸ Nevertheless, even among the growing ranks of Saxon enthusiasts, it was difficult to see it as a matter for unqualified celebration. Richard Verstegan himself, the father of English Teutonism, had been troubled by the tradition that the Saxons had begun their sway with a treacherous massacre of British

Hugh MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal: University Press of New England, 1982).

²⁷ See Bonnie Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 28–35. Browne makes reference in *Hydriotaphia* to the treasures found in Childeric's tomb.

²⁸ See T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (London: Methuen, 1950), 116; Philip Schwyzer, *Literature, Nationalism and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

chieftains on Salisbury plain, though he entered the plea that it might 'be held for a less fault among such as were pagans, than had they been Christians'.²⁹ For those seventeenth-century legal historians who located in the Anglo-Saxon era the origins of English institutions and liberties which the Norman conquest was incapable of erasing, it was an awkward fact that Anglo-Saxon rule was itself based on a violent and treacherous act of conquest.³⁰ We can guess Browne's attitude to such constitutional debates from *Hydriotaphia* as we have it; he is hardly likely to have supposed that popular prerogatives, alone among human artefacts, could maintain their essence and meaning across the deeps of time. Attributing the urns to the Anglo-Saxons would not have obliged him to change his views on this point, but it would unavoidably have embroiled his tract in the kind of politicized debate from which he preferred to steer clear.

Even more troubling than the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons were the circumstances of their conversion. Since near the dawn of the Henrician Reformation, the Church of England had defined itself as the successor or continuation of the early British church, itself held to be near-apostolic in origin.³¹ The conversion of the pagan Saxons by Augustine, a monk dispatched by the pope, was thus seen as a disaster for the native church and for subsequent English history. On this point Anglican historians were essentially united—opinion was divided only over whether the conversion should be viewed as an immediate catastrophe, or as the planting of an evil seed whose fruits would become known over time. Nathaniel Bacon condemned the Saxons for having swallowed 'at one draught . . . a potion of the whole hierarchy of Rome'.³² Others, from John Foxe onward, were prepared to see the early Saxon church as still comparatively pure in its practices, yet condemned by its allegiance to Rome to participate in the downward slide into corruption experienced by the Catholic Church as a whole.

²⁹ Richard Verstegan, *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities* (Antwerp, 1605), 131. As further mitigating circumstances, Verstegan proposes that the Saxons were under the influence of drink, and had secretly armed themselves before the parley only because they had reason to suspect treachery from the British side.

³⁰ See Kidd, *British Identities Before Nationalism*, 75–98. The mid-seventeenth century in fact marks a turning point between the last attempts to locate at least some constitutional foundations among the ancient Britons, and a more exclusively Saxonist line.

³¹ Graham Parry defines this as 'the standard, indeed the necessary, Anglican position', *Trophies of Time*, 185. See Glanmor Williams, 'Some Protestant Views of Early Church History', in *Welsh Reformation Essays* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press), 207–19; Kidd, *British Identities*, 99–122.

³² Quoted in Kidd, *British Identities*, 104.

Just as an account of pagan Anglo-Saxon funeral rites would inevitably have drawn Browne into a discussion of the Augustinian conversion, so, within the terms of seventeenth-century church history, the matter of the conversion could not be considered independently of the subsequent career of the English church, its deepening corruption and final Reformation. The doctrine that the reformed Church of England marked a return to the creed and practices of the early church was one that Browne had been happy to embrace in *Religio Medici*:

I am of that reformed new-cast religion, wherein I dislike nothing but the name, of the same belief our Saviour taught, the apostles disseminated, the Fathers authorised, and the martyrs confirmed; but by the sinister ends of princes, the ambition & avarice of prelates, and the fatal corruption of times, so decayed, impaired, and fallen from its native beauty, that it required the careful and charitable hand of these times to restore it to its primitive integrity.³³

Yet while Browne had subscribed to the general principle that the Church of England was effectively apostolic, he avoided committing himself to the more specific doctrine that it embodied a revival or continuation of the early British church. The question of the relationship between the contemporary church and its ancient insular predecessor is not one he could have skirted so easily in *Hydriotaphia*, had the treatise unfolded along the lines I am now imagining. Here again Browne would have found himself in theoretical difficulties. It is one thing to assert that one's faith is identical with that of the apostles—for Protestants, all this really requires is to have read and believed the Gospels with the aid of grace. But to assert that one's church is effectively identical with another which was wiped out almost a millennium ago involves a different and more difficult claim.

The cherished association of the reformed English church with the ancient British *ecclesia* was not mere patriotic window dressing. It was of crucial importance to Anglican historians in arguing that their church had not revolted from Roman jurisdiction, as it had not been under that jurisdiction originally—a point succinctly made in the title of Isaac Basire's *The Ancient Liberty of the Britannick Church, and the legitimate exemption thereof from the Roman patriarchate* (1661). The belief that the church had survived one long interruption in its history

³³ Browne, *Religio Medici*, in *Works*, i. 11–12.

was a matter of heightened emotional importance to Anglicans in the Interregnum, as it endured another hiatus of as-yet-unknown length. Yet the historians encountered obvious difficulties in demonstrating any genuine continuity between that long extinguished church and their own.³⁴ The doleful achievement of the monk Augustine had not been to corrupt the existing British church but to found a new English church, subservient from its birth to Rome, which would in a short time efface its insular predecessor. The argument for continuity with the earlier church really amounted, then, to a claim of resurrection. Like certain obscure urns, the British church was conceived to have enjoyed a subterranean existence, quietly resting 'under the drums and tramlings of three conquests' before emerging triumphantly as the renewed communion of the living in the 1530s. The English Reformation could thus be said to consist in the archaeological recovery of a still-vital essence from the past. To put it in these terms is to see how impossible it would have been for Browne to square the tradition of the ancient British church with the thesis of *Hydriotaphia* as we have it. It would also, of course, have been difficult for him to refute it openly.

I do not necessarily mean to suggest, and certainly cannot prove, that as Browne fingered the urns and pondered their origins, he imagined each step in the unfolding discussion that would spring from an Anglo-Saxon attribution. Yet he was undoubtedly aware, as any antiquarian of his age would have been, that a discussion of objects representing England's pagan Germanic heritage would lead him unavoidably into multiple areas of current controversy. The history of the early Anglo-Saxons may have been a near blank, but it was also a site where the most pressing debates concerning the nation's racial, constitutional, and religious identity found their centre of gravity. One way or another, the Anglo-Saxons still mattered. The problem for Browne was not that he would have been personally required to plump for a particular version of English history—Gothicist or Britocentric, absolutist or ancient constitutionalist, Anglican or Catholic—but simply that in this field there was no such thing as neutral knowledge. Browne's dilemma is in some ways reminiscent of that of archaeologists working today in regions such as the Caucasus, painfully conscious that any fresh discovery or attribution they make can and probably will be seized upon as a licence

³⁴ Kidd, *British Identities*, 120–1. While some seventeenth-century church historians hinted that the British church was part of the English heritage 'by conquest, 'the mechanism of appropriation is never spelt out' (121).

for bloodshed between groups whose conflicting land claims are based on conflicting versions of the past.³⁵

The questions Browne successfully skirts by giving the urns a Roman origin are precisely those of 'originals' and 'relation'. What are the ethnic origins of England's present-day inhabitants? When did the English constitution take shape, and was it founded on custom or on conquest? From what source does Protestantism in England derive its legitimacy? Are there such things as unchanging national institutions: is nationality destiny? These are very different from the sort of questions Browne is spurred to ask with regard to his putatively Roman urns. 'Who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?' (131). 'Who can but pity the founder of the Pyramids?' (167). 'Who knows whether the best of men be known? or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot, then any that stand remembered in the known account of time?' (167). The latter set of questions are, arguably, more profound, enduring, and poignant than the former. But the point here is that they are not the same questions.

The urns were Anglo-Saxon. Browne said they were Roman. This fact, which receives no more than passing notice in most discussions of *Hydriotaphia*, is a prerequisite for the text as it has come down to us—Browne simply could not have said what he did about the relationship between the present and the past if his subject had been human remains of the late fifth or sixth century. It is at least possible that contemplation of the distasteful debates into which the Anglo-Saxons would surely lead him helped tip his mental scales towards the Roman attribution—in other words, that Browne fiddled when he said it was the Romans who burned. It is also possible and indeed probable that the firmness with which he denounces the folly of believing that the past and present can speak to one other is based in part on his consciousness of how deeply rooted this folly was in his own society, above all in the disciplines of antiquarianism and legal and church history.

Very near the end of *Hydriotaphia* Browne indulges in a pun which comes teasingly close to a confession of the ulterior motives behind the

³⁵ See Philip L. Kohl and Gocha R. Tsetskhladze, 'Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology in the Caucasus', in Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett (eds.), *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 149–74; see also Lynn Meskell (ed.), *Archaeology Under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1998).

Roman attribution, or at least an indictment of the folly of Saxonism. The emphasis, once again, is on the absolute contrast between earthly vanities and genuine immortality:

Pyramids, Arches, Obelisks, were but the irregularities of vain-glory, and wild enormities of ancient magnanimity. But the most magnanimous resolution rests in the Christian religion, which trampleth upon pride, and sets on the neck of ambition, humbly pursuing that infallible perpetuity, unto which all others must diminish their diameters, and be poorly seen in Angles of contingency. (170)

As the margin explains, an '*Angulus contingentiae*' is 'the least of angles'. Browne may well be thinking here of anamorphic paintings such as Holbein's famous *Ambassadors*, which indeed draws the same kind of moral as *Hydriotaphia*. Viewed from the front, that is at a right angle to the painting's surface, the *Ambassadors* reveals its subjects surrounded by the proud instruments of earthly achievement; viewed from the side, that is at an angle of contingency, the men and their possessions fade to obscurity, while what is revealed clearly is the death's head in the lower foreground. But the passage quoted above also depends on a bare-faced pun, of the sort which delighted Browne, and which he had in fact already made once before in *Hydriotaphia*, describing his native East Anglia as 'an Angle wedge or elbow of Britain' (142).³⁶ The pun can be read as a smirking acknowledgement that the urns may indeed be Anglo-Saxon, but even if so they are only 'Angles of contingency'. That is, their Germanic origin is a matter of mere accident, from which nothing may be deduced or said to follow, and which need not be permitted to interfere with the larger deduction of *Hydriotaphia* (which can be made so much more elegantly on the basis of a Roman attribution). In short, acknowledging the Anglo-Saxons would only ruin the perspective. Indeed, Browne would insist, to view the present from any past historical vantage-point, rather than from the vantage-point of eternity, is to see things from a very odd 'Angle' indeed.

The era in which Browne lived and wrote was one of extraordinary political upheaval, but also one in which the early modern habit of glossing innovation as the restoration of continuity with a lost past was, if anything, more pronounced than ever. The millenarian Fifth

³⁶ The only other mention of angles in *Hydriotaphia* is an unambiguous reference to the historical people: 'the Saxons, Jutes, and Angles burnt their dead' (146).

Monarchists were practically unique in setting their sights on the arrival of an unprecedented event. Almost every other contemporary movement or faction, from egalitarian Diggers to cavalier conspirators, proclaimed as their goal the restoration of a lost condition—be that condition Stuart rule, feudal social harmony, Anglo-Saxon liberty, apostolic spiritual purity, Roman civility, the prophetic inspiration of the Israelites, or Edenic communism.³⁷ On all sides, powerful images of resurrection or reawakening expressed the yearning for revived communication between past and present. In the polarized climate of the Second Civil War, there was *Old English Blood Boyling Afresh in Leicestershire Men* (1648).³⁸ In the dark night of the Church of England, its bishop-heroes were reawakened in Thomas Fuller's *Abel Redevivus, or, The Dead Yet Speaking* (1652).³⁹ For Milton, the English nation was a kind of reinvigorated Samson or phoenix:

not degenerated, nor drooping to a fatal decay, but casting off the old and wrinkled skin of corruption to outlive these pangs and wax young again. . . . Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks: Methinks I see her as an eagle mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzl'd eyes at the full midday beam; purging and unscaling her long abused sight at the fountain itself of heav'nly radiance.⁴⁰

Against these dazzling visions and a host of others propounded by everyone from half-crazed prophets to sober church historians, Browne in *Hydriotaphia* marshals a single, devastating image: that of bodies and monuments crumbling endlessly and irretrievably to dust.

³⁷ John Hale, 'England as Israel in Milton's Writings', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 2: 2 (1996), 3.1–54 (<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/02-2/halemil2.html>); Hill, 'Norman Yoke'; Claire Jowitt, "'The Consolation of Israel': Representations of Jewishness in the Writings of Gerrard Winstanley and William Everard', in Andrew Bradstock (ed.), *Winstanley and the Diggers, 1649–1999* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); Steven Zwicker, 'England, Israel, and the Triumph of Roman Virtue', in Richard H. Popkin (ed.), *Millenarianism and Messianism in English Literature and Thought 1650–1800* (New York: Brill, 1988); Daniel Woolf, *The Social Circulation of the Past: English Historical Culture 1500–1730* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 59, 85; Blair Worden, 'Classical Republicanism and the Puritan Revolution', in Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (eds.), *History and Imagination: Essays in Honor of H. R. Trevor-Roper* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982) 182–200.

³⁸ Thomas Grey, *Old English Blood Boyling Afresh in Leicestershire Men, occasioned by the late barbarous invasion of the Scots* (London, 1648).

³⁹ Thomas Fuller et al., *Abel Redevivus, or, The Dead Yet Speaking* (London, 1652).

⁴⁰ John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ii. 1643–1648, ed. Ernest Sirluck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 558.

FROM GENESIS TO INDIANA JONES: 'AN ART TO
MAKE DUST OF ALL THINGS'

The image of the disintegrating body is one we have encountered many times already in this study, in different kinds of texts dating from different periods. Medieval instances include the lock of Guinevere's hair exhumed at Glastonbury, which crumbled to dust in the hands of a greedy monk, and the body of the virtuous British pagan in *St Erkenwald*, which turns 'black as the moldes | As roten as the rottok that rises in powdere' as soon as his soul is admitted to the heavenly feast. We have seen the dramatically opposing responses of Shakespeare and Donne to the body's dissolution, the former recoiling from and the latter eagerly anticipating the prospect of his own dusty dissemination. In the seventeenth century we meet with the crumbling mummies, most notably the corpse imagined in *The Blind Lady*, which 'once touched | Crumbles to dust'. These various examples have been interpreted with reference to a range of specific historical situations—medieval tensions between the English and the Welsh, post-Reformation tensions over the spiritual status of the corpse, early modern anxieties over the rise of a consumer economy. Yet these are but a handful of instances in the long career of a haunting image, which stretches far back into the literatures of the ancient world, and maintains its currency in the present, in both fiction and film. As a trope of the evanescent it has proven paradoxically durable.

Arguably, all western versions of the trope can be traced back to two ancient exemplars, the story of Lot's wife in the Book of Genesis, and that of Eurydice in the Greek myth of Orpheus. In both cases, the sudden dissolution of the body is provoked by the breaking of a divine commandment not to look back. Fleeing over the plain, Lot's wife turns to catch a final glimpse of her home, the condemned city of Sodom, and is herself transformed into 'a pillar of salt' (Genesis 19: 26). Orpheus, leading his dead wife out of Hades, turns back at the threshold of the underworld to see that she is following, thereby condemning her to tread the path back down into darkness. Strictly speaking, in neither case does the body actually crumble. Lot's wife becomes a standing formation of rock-salt (perhaps nothing uncommon on the shores of the Dead

Sea).⁴¹ Eurydice merely recedes back into Hades, or the grave. Yet it is difficult for the reader not to understand the fate of Lot's wife as a dramatic loss of physical coherence—we speak of things being 'scattered like salt'. That Eurydice's fate, too, involves a kind of dissolution—a reconsumption by the earth—is poignantly evident in Rilke's treatment of the myth:

She was already loosened like long hair,
given out like fallen rain,
shared out like a hundredfold supply.
She was already root.⁴²

Both ancient stories stand as powerful warnings against the temptation to seek even a fleeting moment of communion with a lost and vanished past. In one, it is the lost object of desire that crumbles away, as soon as the desirer attempts to grasp it, even in the eye. In the other, it is she who succumbs to the forbidden desire for reconnection who herself dissolves. In both cases, significantly, the victim of dissolution is a woman—as witnessed again in the cases of Guinevere's hair and *The Blind Lady*. Yet if the trope of the crumbling body serves as a way of identifying the problem with women, the nature of the problem varies with the version of the trope. Where the woman is associated with the lost object of desire (Eurydice), femininity encodes instability,

⁴¹ It has recently been proposed that the legend was based on a block of salt with feminine outlines thrown out of the Dead Sea by a tidal wave (caused by the same earthquake that destroyed Sodom); see G. M. Harris and A. P. Beardow, 'The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: A Geotechnical Perspective', *The Quarterly Journal of Engineering Geology*, 28 (1995), 349–62. The theory falls squarely within the centuries-old tradition of seeking scientific explanations for this particular miracle, summarized a century ago by Andrew Dickson White: 'Le Clerc suggested that the shock caused by the sight of fire from heaven killed Lot's wife instantly and made her body rigid as a statue. Eichhorn suggested that she fell into a stream of melted bitumen. Michaelis suggested that her relatives raised a monument of salt rock to her memory. Friedrichs suggested that she fell into the sea and that the salt stiffened around her clothing, thus making a statue of her. Some claimed that a shower of sulphur came down upon her, and that the word which has been translated 'salt' could possibly be translated 'sulphur'. Others hinted that the salt by its antiseptic qualities preserved her body as a mummy. De Saulcy, as we have seen, thought that a piece of salt rock fell upon her, and very recently Principal Dawson has ventured the explanation that a flood of salt mud coming from a volcano incrustated her.' Andrew Dickson White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (London: Macmillan, 1896), ii, 256–7.

⁴² Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes', in *Selected Poems*, trans. J. B. Leishman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 41.

impermanence, that which must be moved beyond in order to survive. Where the longing for the past is embodied in the female gaze (Lot's wife), femininity stands instead for intransigence, torpor, the inability to progress.

Most of the medieval and early modern examples we have encountered in this book belong to the 'Orpheus type'—that is, it is the object of desire that crumbles into dust when the living attempt to reclaim or hold on to it/her. Strikingly similar images occur in modern literature and film. Among the most vividly realized is the passage in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* in which Esteban Trueba breaks open the coffin of his long-dead first wife, Rosa:

We lifted the top, which was as heavy as a piece of lead, and in the white light of the carbide lantern I saw Rosa the Beautiful, with her orange-blossom crown, her green hair, and her unruffled beauty, just as I had seen her many years before, lying in her white coffin on my in-law's dining room table. I stared at her in fascination, unsurprised that time had left her intact, because she was exactly as I'd seen her in my dreams. I leaned over and, through the glass covering her face, placed a kiss on the lips of my immortal beloved. At just that moment a breeze crept through the cypresses, slipped through a crack in the coffin, which until that instant had remained hermetically sealed, and in a flash the unchanged bride dissolved like a spell, disintegrating into a fine gray powder. When I raised my head and opened my eyes, the cold kiss still on my lips, Rosa the beautiful was gone. In her place was a skull with empty sockets, a few strips of marble-colored skin clinging to its cheekbones, and a lock or two of moldy hair at its nape.⁴³

The passage involves both a bitter reversal of the Sleeping Beauty story, and a remarkable echo of the denouement of *St Erkenwald*, with a kiss replacing the bishop's baptismal tear. The loss of the body has a crueller impact here, however, for Trueba's desires have not been of a kind that will admit a spiritual compensation. There is a comparable scene in Federico Fellini's film *Roma* (1971), in which a group of subway workers accidentally penetrate into a perfectly preserved ancient Roman house, complete with vivid and beautiful frescoes on the walls. They gaze about in wonder, and then in horror as the decorations swiftly deteriorate upon exposure to the atmosphere from outside. In both examples, the supposed consequence of the entry of normal air into a hermetically

⁴³ Isabel Allende, *The House of the Spirits*, trans. Magda Bogin (London: Black Swan, 1986), 349.

sealed space provides the necessary hint of a scientific explanation for the playing out of the mythic scene.⁴⁴

The alternative version of the trope, originating in Lot's wife, has also maintained its currency. In two of the films featuring the archaeological swashbuckler Indiana Jones, villains dissolve suddenly when they attempt to lay hands on lost religious artefacts. In *The Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1979), a troop of Nazis melt, evaporate, and otherwise disintegrate when they open the Ark of the Covenant. In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), a deranged collector of antiquities ages with horrifying rapidity and crumbles to dust and bones when he drinks from a chalice he believes to be the life-giving Holy Grail. In this case, the collector, who has been seeking the gift of immortality, could be said to be the object of his own impossible desire—Lot's wife and Eurydice rolled into one. The same might be said of the various 'undead' creatures who crumble spectacularly in the climaxes of a host of horror films, from *Dracula* (1958) to the more recent *The Mummy* (1998) and *The Mummy Returns* (2001).⁴⁵

Behind these monsters and more memorable than them all is Rider Haggard's 2,000-year-old Ayesha—or *She* (1887)—whose flame of immortality fails her at last:

she was shrivelling up . . . her skin changed colour, and in place of the perfect whiteness of its lustre it turned dirty brown and yellow, like an old piece of withered parchment. She felt at her head; the delicate hand was nothing but a claw now, a human talon like that of a badly-preserved Egyptian mummy, and then she seemed to realise what kind of change was passing over her, and she shrieked—ah, she shrieked! . . . Now the skin was puckered into a million wrinkles, and on the shapeless face was the stamp of unutterable age. I never saw anything like it; nobody ever saw anything like the frightful age that was graven on that fearful countenance, no bigger now than that of a two-months' child, though the skull remained the same size, or nearly so, and let all men pray to God they never may, if they wish to keep their reason.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ It is worth observing that dramatic disintegrations of the kind imagined by Fellini and Allende are rarely if ever recorded in modern excavation reports. While it is true that organic substances preserved under abnormal conditions—for example, in the bogs of northern Europe, or through mummification—will begin to deteriorate outside of a controlled environment, they do not crumble in a matter of seconds or minutes, but of weeks or months.

⁴⁵ I am grateful to Dan North for directing me to these among other instances in recent film.

⁴⁶ H. Rider Haggard, *The Annotated She: A Critical Edition of H. Rider Haggard's Victorian Romance*, ed. N. Etherington (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991), 194.

The 'shrivelling' of Ayesha is perhaps the paradigmatic modern scene of human disintegration, involving all the various elements we have found prevalent elsewhere. As with Eurydice, Lot's wife, Guinevere, and Rosa the Beautiful, among others, the victim of dissolution is a woman. As in the Indiana Jones films and the mummy thrillers, and as in *St Erkenwald* and the Glastonbury excavation, the context is colonial—in this case, Central Africa, where a black tribe is ruled by an ageless white queen (whose ultimate demise involves a dramatic change in hue). As in almost all the cases discussed above, the larger narrative is one of archaeological discovery (in *She*, the English protagonists follow directions on an ancient Greek potsherd to discover a lost city).⁴⁷ The feminized, colonized object of archaeology crumbles to dust beneath the horrified gaze of the male European archaeologist—again and again.⁴⁸ In such instances, the trope of the crumbling body may be said to stand both for the failure of archaeology and for its ironic success. Conceived as a means of restoring communication between the present and the past, archaeology is doomed to frustration. But as a means of keeping the past *in its place*—and with it, those peoples who, even while still above the earth, may be considered to belong to the past—archaeology has proven a highly effective instrument of colonial power.

What place belongs to Thomas Browne in the troubling history of this trope? It may be worth noting that, on the basis of the thinness of the bones and the objects like combs and tweezers included with them, he judged the occupants of the urns to be female (a reasonable deduction, perhaps, though one disputed by modern archaeologists).⁴⁹ But what *Hydriotaphia* has in common with subsequent—and earlier—texts in which the image of human dissolution occurs is really more straightforward. Browne deploys his images of disintegrating bodies and

⁴⁷ On Haggard and archaeology, see Shawn Malley, "'Time Hath No Power Against Identity': Historical Continuity and Archaeological Adventure in H. Rider Haggard's *She*", *English Literature in Transition*, 40 (1997), 275–97; Richard Pearson, 'Archaeology and Gothic Desire: Vitality Beyond the Grave in H. Rider Haggard's *Ancient Egypt*', in Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (eds.), *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 218–44.

⁴⁸ One further example, partly reminiscent of *She*, is *Lost Horizon* (novel by James Hilton, 1939, film directed by Frank Capra, 1937). In the midst of the Himalayas, a group of Europeans stumble upon the lost, timeless valley of Shangri-La, whose inhabitants age so slowly that they are practically immortal. One of the men falls in love with a woman of Shangri-La and attempts to take her with him over the mountains; he is then forced to watch in horror as she withers with age and dies before his eyes.

⁴⁹ There appears to be little or no gender differentiation involved in the distribution of grave goods in cremation burials; see Lucy, *Anglo-Saxon Way of Death*, 110–11.

crumbling monuments to assert that the past is past, beyond the reach of human recovery—so much so that any attempt at recovery will only hasten the process of loss. It follows that any political or cultural claim based on communion with the past, or preservation of its essence, must be dismissed as folly.

In placing the gentle Browne in the company of Rider Haggard and Indiana Jones, my aim has not been to discredit him by association. Browne's denial of agency to the dead was intended, I believe, as a kind of prophylactic against the implication of scholarship in political violence; he could hardly have guessed that an outlook roughly analogous to his own would later come to underwrite projects of colonial (and neo-colonial) violence. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that one aim of this chapter has been to discredit Browne's vision of history and archaeology—above all, as it finds itself mirrored in contemporary scholarly attitudes—by observing that it is rooted in what is either a mistaken interpretation or a conscious fudging of the facts. By opting for a Roman origin for his urns, Browne did not so much refute as evade and render silent by mere omission the various ways in which the Anglo-Saxons could be held to remain in communion with their English descendants. Whether or not he finessed the evidence to avoid unwelcome controversy, he clearly found it more comfortable to be dealing with artefacts which testified to the unbridgeability of historical divides.

There is undoubtedly a good measure of comfort involved in Browne's position. If we can never catch the voices of the dead, we need not strain our ears. If our relationships are only with texts or artefacts, not with their departed makers, then the question of responsibility to others becomes less pressing. If what I have been doing in this chapter has been merely 'talking about *Hydriotaphia*', rather than 'talking with Browne', then I need not reproach myself too much for having insinuated that Browne is a liar. I may reassure myself, moreover, that by not attempting to be responsible to the dead, I have been the more responsible to the living, who are bound to be much more interested (if they are interested at all) in what we can do with *Hydriotaphia*, than in what Browne through *Hydriotaphia* might wish to do with us. Finally, I may claim to have confirmed the clear distinction between my own decorous scholarly practice and that of wild-eyed political zealots (nationalists, fundamentalists, and others) who intrude upon the peace of the present with turbulent messages from the dead.

Yet the price of such comfort is a high one, for both archaeology and literary studies. As I have argued, what binds these fields together

and distinguishes them from others is their unique intimacy with the traces of past life. As disciplines with their roots in the Renaissance, archaeology and literary studies began with the desire for contact with the dead. The same desire, more than any other, draws students to these fields today. That the dream of reviviscence is, in any literal sense, incapable of fulfilment is largely beside the point. Even if nothing of the dead could be said to survive in their textual and material traces (a point I am far from conceding), the pursuit of contact remains fundamental to our scholarly activity, functioning both as a primary source of emotional inspiration and aesthetic intensity, and—still more importantly—as the basis of a specific disciplinary ethics. As members of those classes of professionals devoted to the traces of the past, literary critics and archaeologists have the role and the daunting responsibility of interpreting between the living and the dead.

There is an irony in that, beginning with the desire to speak with the dead, we invariably end up speaking for them. What makes the irony tolerable is that the dead are at the same time speaking through us. As we saw earlier, ‘voice’ as a term in contemporary archaeology does not describe a quality inhering in the autonomous artefact, but rather the product of a relationship between traces. In a similar way, the true and full voice of archaeological or literary scholarship is not simply the voice of the living writer; it is the product or precipitate of contact between the scholar and the traces of the dead. Thus, as I have argued here, the Anglo-Saxon cremation urns unearthed at Walsingham can be heard speaking in *Hydriotaphia*, even as Browne derides their supposed silence and occludes their origin. By the same token, Browne’s voice interpenetrates with mine in this chapter, emerging through my utterances even as I make assertions about the meaning of his. I have, it is true, raised certain doubts about his scholarly integrity, but in return I am fairly certain I have overheard him mocking me as a ‘vulgar discoverer’. The dialogues we hold with the dead are not always amicable. The wonder of it is that we go on talking.

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