

Remembering the Dead

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I suggest to you... that it would be difficult to conceive of anything more ghastly and garish than some of the big cemeteries in Liverpool and other cities. For instance, some of the headstones surmounted by a blasé looking angel in a whitish nightie look particularly awful. The headstones are varied, but mostly in varying degrees of ugliness. Some here and there are simple and dignified. Others are ornate, and suggest a competition as to who could provide the more costly memorials than their neighbours, and seem to borrow their architecture from picture palaces or ‘grand hotels’. (T. F. H. Wilson, addressing the Northwestern Branch of Cemetery Superintendants in 1936, quoted in Rugg 219).

quickly bared flesh; apparition
twenty-six years passed; and now returned
to remain in this poetry. (C. P. Cavafy, “To Remain” 371)

After the Victorian obsession with death and mourning, ostentatious gravestones and funeral memorials, macabre mourning jewellery containing the hair of the deceased and even more macabre family photographs taken with the dead, the backlash to this came in the form of reactions akin to Wilson’s quoted above. Cemeteries became spaces of consistency, headstones “simple and dignified” (Wilson, quoted in Rugg 219). Funeral rites were abridged, the dead were tidied away. As Freud remarked, summarising attitudes to death during the post-Victorian years prior to the First World War: “We showed an unmistakable tendency to put death on one side, to eliminate it from life. We tried to hush it up.” (Quoted in Ramazani 11).

However, there is one area where the dead are still celebrated: the elegiac poem. It may be the case, as Isabella Holmes argued in 1896, that the space which is dedicated to the bodies of the dead would be better served “by its dedication to the living” (Holmes 278), but the poetry of mourning provides infinite space, as Cavafy notes, “To Remain” (cited above). Amanda Merritt’s “After the Death of your Husband” is a contemporary example of the anguish of mourning rendered into verse. With all the marks of raw pain and inconsolable grief which determines such modern texts as Maggie O’Farrell’s first novel *After You’d Gone*, this poem recollects the much-missed husband, and mourns for him.

“Once these stars did not exist” (4) Merritt informs, providing a clue to the “prenatal heart” (6) of the poetic persona before the husband (and

the love they shared) was known to the mourner. This would be a point in time, presumably, before he had even entered her life and was subsequently lost. The awareness of “Orion right-side up in the winter sky” (1) hints at a knowledge which has been provided by the husband and gained through him. Orion, ever-present and ever-remaining after the husband was not, provides a sharp reminder of all that the narrator has lost.

These aide-memoires are just further impediments for the poetic persona to move on from their grief. “The dead are the bradycardia of the earth,..” (7), slowing the passage of time, much as bradycardia slows the rhythms of the heartbeat, preventing the mourner from progressing with their life at a more normative (less pathological) pace. The world in colour – the way we would normally see the world – becomes “an impurity”. Instead, the narrator is stuck in the sepia tones of the past: “all my halite thoughts are yellow” (22). The inability to forget, and the desire to preserve and remember, become an attempt to literally re-member the body of the husband, recreating the shape and scent of the lost person in his “Closets of clothing worn now unworn” (11). Yet, for the griever, there is no comfort in these “his skins” : “this isn’t him” (15).

As the poem progresses, it seems to follow the path of other modern elegists, who, as Ramazani argues: “tend to enact the work not of normative but of “melancholic” mourning”. Ramazani observes that these elegists tend to exercise a “fierce resistance to solace” (Ramazani 4). This resistance to relief in the “scorched” (19) mourner is exemplified as she comes to embody the memorial process: “I could be the corpse flower” (26). The poetic voice thus becomes a living memorial (a species of floral wreath) to the lost husband.

Indeed, the griever feels it is “not fair” 27) in some manner to progress without the lost one. “I could grow a nocturnal garden” (26), the narrator informs us; a garden of remembrance, where no daylight permeates and the “shades” are “drawn down” (27). The image of a garden in elegiac poetry is a prevalent one. In Thomas Hardy’s celebrated elegiac verse, the loss of the days when “our paths through flowers” (Hardy, “After a Journey” 59) is frequently bemoaned. In lamenting the decay of a loved one, Hardy prevents himself from entering the garden, drawing down the “shades” in a manner akin to Meriton’s narrator:

Close up the casement, draw the blind,
Shut out that stealing moon,
She wears too much the guise she wore
Before our lutes were strewn
With years-deep dust, and names we read
On a white stone were hewn.

Step not forth on the dew-dashed lawn
 To view the Lady' s Chair,
 Immense Orion' s glittering form,
 The Less and Greater Bear:
 Stay in; to such sights we were drawn
 When faded ones were fair. (Hardy, "Shut Out that Moon" 33-4).

Like Merritt' s "Orion" (1), Hardy' s Moon is too painful a reminder of what has been lost. The garden becomes a no-go area: "Brush not the bough for midnight scents", Hardy peremptorily orders (Hardy, "Shut Out that Moon" 34). If, as Laura Vivanco argues in her study of Harlequin Mills & Boon romantic novels, the garden is a classical traditional space for courtship and romance (Vivanco, Loc. 4072), then upon the demise of one participant in that romance, it becomes a forbidden space. As Cecil Day Lewis observes in "The Album", the garden after the death of a loved one, previously a space enjoyed together, becomes an apocalyptic waste land: "a tree stripped bare/By intemperate gales, her amazing/Noonday of blossom spoilt" (Day Lewis, "The Album" 57). It is just one further reminder of what is irrecoverably lost.

The disease of mourning and *dis*-ease which the poetic persona of Merritt' s elegy expresses at the inability to progress with life after this death is highlighted by the diseases which are present in the text. Utilising medical discourse and scientific language, for example prescription medicine names such as "zolpidem" (34) to describe the seasonal background to the poem, the poem hints at the illness which has deprived the husband of his life. Anger, the mourner confides, "stiffens like an artery" (38-9), just as a stiffened artery is a symptom of a heart attack. We are back with the "bradycardia" (7) again; that frightening slowing of the heart until it stops. That the death is sudden and unexpected, we know, because this is "real violence" (L40), a "sudden, terrifying seizure" (41). Unforeseen and startling in its consequences, the abrupt absence left by the dead leads to an "insuck of the universe" (42). A horrific stunned pause, before the realisation of loss, "the explosion, after" (42) follows: the broken heart of the griever. The sufferer - *both* sufferers, i. e. the diseased and the mourner - are suddenly no more. The husband is dead and gone. The mourner finds that they are unable to proceed with normal life.

Where the husband has gone, the poem does not make clear. We know the husband is dead. That much is apparent from the title of the poem. However, there is no grave space delineated within the lines of the text. The grave, as Julie Rugg argues, is, "despite its outdoor location" a "domestic space" (Rugg 219). Linked to the home, as the new home of the deceased, the grave provides a site for the mourner to visit, remember and provides tangible, physical evidence of the family ties which bond the

mourner with the mourned. That space is missing from the poetic remembrance; and a further analysis of the title of the poem provides a possible explanation for this. “After the Death of *your* Husband” (emphasis mine). That “your” with its lower case “y” is almost a coy, half-concealed indicator that the husband in question may not belong to the mourner. “[T]he Death of your Husband” seems to hint that this is the husband of somebody else. That someone else, like the grave which cements those family ties, is also absent from the text. The grave is absent because seemingly there are no family ties to cement: the one the mourner grieves for was potentially not family at all. Therefore, where the text or inscription of the headstone would mark the remains of the deceased, here, instead, all that remains is inscribed within the text of the poem.

Gerhard Joseph and Herbert Tucker argue that: “[m]ourning, unlike dying, is a lived and to that extent a communicable experience” (Joseph & Tucker 111). Almost universal in experience - nearly everybody, after all, has lost someone - Merritt’s elegiac expression of grief is as individual and original as we all are. Every evocation of grief is unique to the mourner. What Merritt’s “After the Death of your Husband” illustrates is a space in which to recall and recollect the dead. This is a space beyond the hospital where the disease was suffered, and beyond the grave where the deceased is interred. In a world which contains more people than ever before and more death than ever before, space for the dead is limited. The poem, however, is a space which lives on in the mind of the mourner (and the poetry reader); a space where the dead can be recalled, reconstructed, “and now returned/to remain in this poetry” (C. P. Cavafy, “To Remain” 371).

Biographical Information

Val Derbyshire is a WRoCAH supported AHRC Competition student researching the works of Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806) in the School of English, University of Sheffield.

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