'Where Night's Black Bird her Infamy Sings' – Translating Tudor and Stuart Concepts of Death from the Language of Tomb Effigies

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Flow, my tears, fall from your springs. Exil'd for ever let me mourn
Where night's black bird her sad infamy sings, There let me live forlorn.

Introduction

John Dowland's Lachrimae composed in 1600 is a lament for a life lived in darkness away from the bright lights of fortune. Darkness, neglect, Time's cruelty, spiteful age - all of these were themes used by Elizabethan songwriters to prefigure the stark inevitability of death.[1] But while music and texts might be thought to provide their own transchronological translations, what of the objects which survive to us from this period? Does time render an object mute? Does it hold its meanings only in the present? Must archaeologists accept enslavement to empiricism as being inevitable? Should we rigorously set aside any consideration of past meanings and confine ourselves to the methodology of making, use and decay of the building, the monument, the object itself? Or can we address the immateriality of meaning with which material culture is imbued and begin to approach the infinitely more problematic point at which one can begin to assess past meaning? Are there modes of translation which can be brought forward to assist this endeavour? I think translating mechanisms can be devised and this paper is an exploration of a series of ideas which have enabled me to begin the long run-up to an understanding of the relationship existing between Tudor and Stuart mortuary ideas and their material expression.

Recently I have been assembling a theoretical framework for an archaeological study of early modern tomb effigies. These sculptured effigies of the elite dead – monarchs, aristocrats, clerics, the gentry, the wealthy – are found in cathedrals and churches throughout Europe and derive from a long medieval line which is itself linked into the Roman and Etruscan mortuary tradition.[2] Unlike their medieval forebears whose colour has often decayed, Tudor and Stuart effigies still carry their pigments which are frequently refurbished. They are depicted as figures fully clothed in garments which supply vast quantities of information about dress, toilet habits, textiles, weaponry and insignia and are in England always shown with open eyes.[3]

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[1] For the music and text of this song see *English Ayres –Elizabethan and Jacobean*, Vol. 4, eds., Peter Warlock and Philip Wilson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), pp. 6-7.

[2] E. Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: its changing aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), pp. 81-2.

[3] P. Lindley, 'Innovations, tradition and disruption in tomb sculpture' in Gaimster, D. and Stamper, P., (eds.), *The Age of Transition: the archaeology of English culture 1400-1600*, (Oxford: The Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph 15 Oxbow Monograph 98, 1993), pp. 77-92, (p. 80).

Researching these figures from an archaeological perspective has proved surprisingly problematic since, as material culture they have a quality of disciplinary fragmentation which includes archaeological invisibility and which is framed in a number of different disciplinary languages.

Their historical place in mortuary culture has been addressed by scholars such as Clare Gittings who fits them into a wider study of death in the post-medieval world, by architectural historians and at some length by art historians like David Howarth, and especially Nigel Llewellyn.[4]

In addition many scholars approach tomb effigies from the perspective of whether they constitute art forms or not. Nikolaus Pevsner is quite definite about this. In spite of his detailed descriptions of them in the *Buildings of England,* he considers them generically 'stiff and incompetent'; as forms of non-art he assimilates them alongside church furnishings as subjects for his architectural expertise.[5] Llewellyn satirises this attitude by asking

> Are these funeral monuments art? ... The mixed styles of Elizabethan and Jacobean periods surely contravene the law that high art be pure. Many have described the effigies of this period as 'wooden' but is not the purpose of high art to look real or natural or expressive? The general view is that the monuments of post-Reformation England are at the very least bad art and perhaps not even art at all.

Llewellyn suggests that this is to apply a shockingly presentist idea of 'high art' to this tradition, a view which, if advanced to an actual inhabitant of early modern England, may well have seemed incomprehensible and wildly irrelevant.[6] Moreover the emphasis of research falls on the elite people commemorated or on the institutions which enabled this development of the genre. Scholars direct their attention to royal tombs and the politics of the memorialisation of the monarchy or they use tombs as barometers of Renaissance or religious climate change.[7] One ends up with a multiplicity of

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[4] C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1984). See also D. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death; Ritual, religion and the life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); V. Harding, 'Choices and changes: death, burial and the English Reformation' in Gaimster, D. and Gilchrist, R., (eds.), *The Archaeology of Reformation 1480-1580*, Monograph 1, (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2003), pp. 386-398; D. Howarth, 'Self-fashioning and the Classical moment in mid-16th century English architecture' in Gent, L., and Llewellyn, N., (eds.), *Renaissance Bodies; the human figure in English culture 1540-1660,* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), pp. 198-217; N. Llewellyn, *The Art of Death; visual culture in the English death ritual c 1500-1800*, (London: Reaktion Books in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1991). N Pevsner *Buildings of England series*, including Pevsner, N., and Lloyd, D., 1967, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1955-67); K Thomas, *The Ends of Life: roads to fulfilment in Early Modern England,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).2009 pp 226-267.

5   N. Pevsner, The Englishness of English art: an expanded and annotated version of the Reith Lectures 1955, (London: The Architectural Press, 1955).

[6] N. Llewellyn, 'The Royal Body: monuments to the dead for the living' in Gent, L. and Llewellyn, N., (eds.), Renaissance bodies: the human figure in English culture, (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), pp. 218-240, (p. 220).

[7] See E. Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: traditional religion in England 1400-1580, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 306-8; Harding, 'Choices and Changes', pp. 394-5;

vastly interesting perspectives on the subject none of which lead naturally into an archaeological approach. Taking them together though has proved quite productive if, firstly, some archaeological questions are applied to them. These are

> How were tombs socially relevant?
> To what extent did they embody the cultural identities of their consumers?
> How can they be construed from their materiality?
> To what extent can they be seen to be social agents?

These questions have elicited the following preliminary working model:

The material and social power of effigies

As memorials of elite culture early modern tomb effigies speak in a top-down manner. They are fashioned to place their viewer in the subsidiary position of remembrancer or of the respectful and impressed observer. To emphasise this, the effigies themselves usually recline upon a chest or table tomb on plinths at a height which prevents us from looking down on them while the emblems of their state, their heraldic achievements and the tablets which describe the social status of the deceased are usually placed above, forcing us to look up. These are semiotic designs intended to illustrate the social and political dominance of the people buried within and, importantly, of the family who caused the monument to be erected.

There is also a gradation of this understanding. The inscriptions are frequently written in Latin - the language of the educated male - and the heraldry which constitutes an essential element of their design is a similar socially restricted knowledge system.

For the non-elite the tombs have a substitutive function. As post-Reformation churches were being stripped of their colour and imagery, Elizabethan legislation was introduced to preserve tombs since they were deemed to memorialise important people rather than to subvert Protestantism.

With a still largely illiterate population the obliteration of medieval religious depictions denied ordinary church-goers the immediate visual and sensory encounters which they previously responded to in strongly emotional ways and which underpinned their sense of ontological security. The secular iconography which the church authorised for effigies and the dramatic representations of central social figures acted as a replacement for the structured religious certainties of pre-Reformation church imagery. Placed in an aisle, a transept, in the chancel or even in a side chapel these tombs blatantly claimed for themselves a spectacular role which the less arresting chancel altar or communion table was unable to compete with. One might say that the decorative secularisation of tomb effigies reiterated the humanist concept that the upper classes had taken over from the saints.

D. Howarth, 'Self-Fashioning', p.154; Lindley, 'Innovations, tradition and disruption, p. 77 and p. 86; Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture.*

This largely phenomenological model of the tomb's material potency has been informed by the linguistic insights of the various disciplines I have been discussing. But important outstanding questions still remain unanswered: are these tombs social agents in themselves and if so, why are they and what form does their agency take?

What I have missed out of this discussion is any consideration of the contribution anthropological viewpoints might add.

Incorporating Alfred Gell's perspectives

Alfred Gell's ideas on the anthropology of art are extensive and often resisted because of his dismissal of aesthetics as an intrinsic component of the practice and appreciation of art and because of the complexity of his extremely systematic formulation of art-relationships. These elements of his thinking presently remain outside the scope of this paper and thus where his perspective has been of most relevance is in his discussion of the role of material objects as social agents.[8] Like Latour, Gell sees objects and art-objects in particular as active entities. We sustain a relationship with them mediated by what they *do* to us as much as by what we do to them. They *do* things rather than *mean* things. In this way children's relationships with their toys may be more intense than their relationships with their siblings. And this is not simple anthropomorphism: social agency entraps objects alongside the subjects who encounter them. In terms of art-objects, under these conditions this agency can be seen to be fluid and passes to and fro between people and things according to when and how the art-object is perceived as operating.[9]

This brings us back to the original consideration of tomb effigies as examples of art-forms. Does Gell's analysis make them art-forms? Does it matter whether they are or not? If it does, and I am using them presently as such for the purposes of translation, how can these theories be used to put flesh on my fledgling archaeological enquiry? Let me apply them to a case study:

The Wriothesley Tomb, St Peters, Titchfield, Hants.

St Peter's is a large parish church, originally attached to Titchfield's Premonstratensian Abbey and later in the gift of the Wriothesleys, the sixteenth and seventeenth century Earls of Southampton. Henry, the second earl, left money for the construction of a massive free-standing tomb which bears the figures of his parents and himself, to be erected in the centre of St Peter's southern chapel. It was made by the Fleming Gerard Johnson in 1594 from red white-veined and white red-veined marble and culminates in the three painted alabaster effigies. The tomb is so enormous it occupies most of

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8 A. Gell, 'Vogel's Net: traps as artworks and artworks as traps', Journal of Material Culture, vol.1, no. 1, (1996), pp. 15-38; A. Gell, *Art and Agency: an anthropological theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). For an analysis of his theoretical formulae see J. Tanner and R. Osborne (eds.), Introduction to Tanner, J. and Osborne, R., (eds.), Art's agency and Art History, (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp.1-25.

9 Gell, *Art and Agency*, pp. 14-21 and pp. 155-220. See also B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: an introduction to Actor Network Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

the chapel's space and its altar, situated under its eastern window, would have been entirely obscured by it.[10]

Figure 1 *The Wriothesley Tomb, St Peter's parish church, Titchfield, Hants. 1594.* View of north side showing the effigy of (from top) Jane, first Countess of Southampton, her son Henry. 2nd Earl and two of his children. (Author's photograph).

So what does this tomb do?

Firstly and obviously, it asserts spatial dominance. The only social activity that can take place here is that of a circumnavigation of the tomb itself. It thereby claims your attention and because it is ornately sculpted and burgeoning with detailed imagery it takes time to inspect it; so secondly it demands your time.

As you circle the tomb, it also exercises the Gellian quality of captivation – as a masterly piece of sculpture it commands awe, respect, engagement but also a sense of defeat in that you yourself cannot follow Johnson very far in his acts of creation. To adapt Gell

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[10] S. Roffey, 'Deconstructing a Symbolic World: the Reformation and the English medieval parish chantry' in Gaimster, D., and Gilchrist, R., (eds.), *The Archaeology of Reformation 1480-1580*, Monograph 1, (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2003). pp 350-1; Pevsner, *The Buildings of England*, pp. 622-5; W. Page, *A History of the County of Hampshire*, Vol. 3, Victoria County History, British History Online www.british-history.ac.uk (1908), pp. 220-33.

> You are left suspended between two worlds; the world in which you normally live, in which objects have rational explanations and knowable origins, and the world adumbrated in the (sculpture), which defeats explanation.... (therefore)... you cannot achieve the necessary congruence between your experience of agency and (Johnson's) agency which originated the sculpture.[11]

In this sense the tomb has captivated you – you are caught in an unfamiliar relationship with the empirical world - entrapped in an existential and historical cul-de-sac of semi-apprehension. This may be disorienting but it is a very powerful piece of sensory translation.

To return to its spatial configuration: the tomb itself is of a size and height which allows the observer to approach quite closely but not too close. Moreover it has obelisks at each corner which establish spatial boundaries – what is inside the tomb perimeter (Wriothesley space) and what outside (non-Wriothesley space). The Southampton heirs kneel in panelled frames just inside the Wriothesley boundary. Above them father and grandfather flank the upper tier at the eye-height of a tall man. As you circle it is the Earls' bodily presence which is most impressive and immediate. The Countess reclines on the upper tier, only semi-visible and untouchable - both elevated and constrained by her private position. The tomb is regulating proximity and controlling your relationship to it. It tells you how to behave and what to think and, by doing so in a series of constant repetitions, it suggests your living relationship with it is transitory, tangential, insignificant compared to its solidity, permanence and its quality of mnemonic gravitas. It bosses you around.

So, is this an analysis which only applies to the present? Does the tomb as an agent do this to us because of our situation in time or was it always constructed to act on its onlooker in this way? I think it was. Gell suggests that in the West it is the Protestant-Puritan ethic which has stripped away our response to the 'power of images' but in this case we are contemplating a socially authorised set of Protestant images which present very potent forms of bodily presence.[12] We are looking at bodies here or representations of bodies which are understood as dead but whose open eyes cause them to be viewed in a much more ambivalent way.

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[11] Gell, *Art and Agency*, pp. 68-9 and pp. 70-2.
[12] Ibid., p. 97.

The agency of abstractions

Leading on from Marilyn Strathern's work on partibility, Gell's discussion of the 'distributed' person may usefully be applied to tomb effigies.[13] Although I would never suggest that the effigies' substitutive qualities encouraged worship in the same way as saintly imagery, their lifelike configuration combined with the symbols and devices associated with them render them mimetic or subliminally magical. In fact Pevsner's criticism of them as 'stiff and incompetent' may be a necessary adjunct of this function.

As Maurice Howard and Nigel Llewellyn have observed, there was a new concentration on bodily fashioning during the 16th and 17th centuries in which the living body became a canvas for the personal expression of status and identity – the gentry's clothing, jewellery and accoutrements being integral parts of this self-fashioning. Llewellyn suggests that in terms of mortuary ideology the presentation of the clothed effigy and its emblems of status represented a special kind of body – a Body 'Politic' which took over from the Natural Body when an elite member of society died.[14] This also became a Monumental Body which, I suggest, was instated as watchful and constantly present. The effigy in this way was a translating device for the redistribution of the dead person's political persona which embodied not only the material signatures of familial or dynastic significance but also embodied the liminal presence of this significance. What prompts this suggestion is evidence for the engagement of early modern people with death as an agent.

The most obvious example of this in terms of tomb effigies is the persistence of the use of *transis*. *Transis* – effigies of skeletal bodies in a state of decay appear most frequently in the late Middle Ages but they were used into the 17th century, as the tomb of Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, demonstrates. Here the *transi* represents Cecil's Natural Body while his Political and Monumental Body is raised above it in an uncorrupted state borne on a bier by the four Cardinal Virtues, definitively secular personifications pulled in to underline this incorruptibility.[15]

Representations of this sort define the much more immanent relationship early modern society had with death which also involved physical closeness and an ability to present the dead as *auteurs*.

A painting which exemplifies the closeness existing between the dead and the living is the Saltonstall portrait painted in 1634 by David des Granges.[16] This shows Sir Thomas Saltonstall represented as if at his first wife's deathbed while his second living wife sits apart, in a chair by the bedhead. Saltonstall holds two children by the hand. These are those of his

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[13]   M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Gell, *Art and Agency*, pp. 96-154.
[14]   Howard, 'Self-Fashioning', pp. 198-9; Llewellyn, *Art of Death*, pp. 46-59 and Llewellyn, 'The Royal Body', p. 198.
[15]   Llewellyn, 'The Royal Body', pp. 221-2. For image of this see photograph in Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual,* p. 129. The tomb is in the church of St Etheldreda, Hatfield, Herts.
[16]   The Saltonstall Portrait is in the Tate Gallery, London. For an image go to www.tate.org.uk

first wife, two years dead, while his second cradles her own new-born baby. The picture is therefore an interrogation of Saltonstall's relationship with the living and the dead and, though he binds his second wife into the composition with his gaze, it is possible to interpret this painting as an embodied statement of the pre-eminence of his first marriage. It is in this sense that I envisage the dead of this period as *auteurs* and use this cinematic term, rather than the commoner term 'agent', to suggest that it may be the first wife's death which has prompted, enabled and 'authored' the portrait. The contradictory duality of this painting – the first wife as both dead and alive – endorses these conceptions of the Natural and Monumental body since she combines her physical form with her socio-political significance; her continued relationship with her living husband. Moreover des Granges' depiction of her emphasises her bodily mimesis, she is shown as alive-in-death and is thus in a state of liminality. There is no *closure* expressed here, she is a constant member of this household: what is underlined is her continued existence and her *closeness.*

This *auteurial* closeness is very pronounced in mortuary effigies and exemplified by one of the most famous – that of John Donne in St Paul's Cathedral. Izaak Walton wrote an account of the planning and methodology which went into Donne's arrangements for this monument:

> Several charcoal fires being first made in (Donne's) large study, he brought with him into that place his winding sheet in his hand, and having put off all his clothes, had this sheet put on him, and so tied with knots at his head and feet. And his hands so placed as dead bodies are usually fitted, to be shrouded and put into their coffin, or grave.

A portrait design was then made and his effigy, standing upright was carved from it. Donne then studied the portrait as 'an hourly object till his death'.[17]

Here death as an agent arrives in response to Donne's invitation. Donne has enacted his own death pre-mortem and thereafter studies it, perhaps in order to understand and control its processes or to lose his own dread of it. Becoming intensely close to his own death, he thereby authors and ritualises his passing, constructing his own Monumental body from a conflation of his Natural Body (Donne in a shroud) with his Political one (Donne as poet and divine standing to confront death).[18]

Tudor and Stuart effigies in all their variety of forms not only show the desire to leave behind or redistribute the vestige of the individual and their house in the world of the living but are also a means for the individual to author a relationship with death itself.

This early modern preoccupation with the physical closeness of death becomes visible via a multidisciplinary approach which is based on the

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[17] Izaak Walton cited in Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual,* p. 195.
[18] John Donne's memorial by Nicholas Stone was erected 1613 and can be seen in St Paul's Cathedral, London. For an image see Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual*, p. 128.

theoretical perceptions I have been discussing. In this way the object as both agent and as a mode of translation from present to past enables the hermeneutic process to be applied to questions of immateriality which have hitherto been archaeologically disregarded. I hope it also opens up the subject for future exploration.

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