THE WORK OF THE DEAD

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF MORTAL REMAINS

THOMAS W. LAQUEUR

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Introduction

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[Diogenes the Cynic] ordered himself to be thrown anywhere without being buried. And when his friends replied, “What! to the birds and beasts?” “By no means,” saith he; “place my staff near me, that I may drive them away.” “How can you do that,” they answer, “for you will not perceive them?” “How am I then injured by being torn by those animals, if I have no sensation?”

CICERO, Tusculan Disputations

In the beginning was the corpse: lifeless matter from which a human had fled. Almost two and a half millennia ago, the outrageous Diogenes (ca. 412–323 B.C.E.) told his students that when he died he wanted his body to be tossed over the wall where it would be devoured by beasts. He was gone; it no longer mattered to him. This book is about how and why Diogenes was right (his or any body forever stripped of life cannot be injured), but also existentially wrong, wrong in a way that defies all cultural logic. It is about why the dead body matters, everywhere and across time, as well as in particular times and particular places. It matters in disparate religious and ideological circumstances; it matters even in the absence of any particular belief about a soul or about how long it might linger around its former body or about what might become of it after death; it matters across all sorts of beliefs about an afterlife or a God. It matters in the absence of such beliefs. It matters because the living need the dead far more than the dead need the living. It matters because the dead make social worlds. It matters because we cannot bear to live at the borders of our mortality (fig. 1.1).

This book is about the body, about the disenchanted corpse, about “corpses without consciousness”: bereft, vulnerable, abject. It is about that which “life breath left... behind” as Homer says of the bones of the fallen in the Iliad. The fate of this thing has been known for millennia to those who contemplate the dead. A fifth-century C.E. Buddhist text describes with great precision the “stages of foulness”: “the bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut-up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, a skeleton.” All the rest is commentary that modern forensic science has enriched.
Depending on climate, happenstance, and technology, a body might be around as decaying organic matter for only a matter of weeks or months, a few years at best. It begins to devour itself within minutes, as the enzymes that had once turned food into nutriments start disassembling the body that no longer needs them in their old job. This is autolysis. Bacteria freed from the gut soon afterward also start to devour the flesh; in later stages microbes from the soil and the air join in. Putrefaction. Eisenia fetida—the worm in our compost bins—dines on the carcage in some climes; so do flies and other insects. There are many variations on this theme. Anything that keeps bacteria and chemical reactions from working as well as they might preserves bodies: dry cold, wet, and sterile conditions. The deserts of Egypt and the high Andes, the frozen tundra of Siberia, the acid bogs of Denmark, tanning agents, and anaerobic conditions—all preserve the dead far longer than anyone had reason to expect. So do the desiccating clay caves of Palermo, famous for their ability to make corpses into mummies that could be dressed up to look ready for the opera. The soil of the cemetery in the old colonial city of Guanajuato yielded up mummies of nineteenth-century cholera victims that have become a major tourist attraction and an emblem of Mexico’s engagement with the dead. But under most conditions, an adult corpse is lucky to survive a decade. Bodies encased in lead fare better than those in wood or in the ground; it helps to die on an empty stomach and with evacuated bowels; it helps if someone has removed the viscera; embalming helps. Collagen and hair do better than other soft tissues.1

Bones fare better than flesh. How much better again depends on where they lie. In the highly acidic soil of the great seventh-century Anglo-Saxon burial mound at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk, for example, only the stains of bones remain; in the more basic soil of Wharram Percy at the edge of the chalk wolds of north Yorkshire, surviving medieval skeletons are in good shape. Generally, the large bones of the leg fare better than the small bones of the foot. But it matters little. The skeletal remains of friends, of enemies, and of strangers are, as has been endlessly rehearsed over thousands of years, pretty much indistinguishable. Of course, some may bear the marks of the life that once clothed them: violence, disease, and time itself leave marks. Bones do tell tales. But without dress or some other distinguishing mark, it was hard to tell them apart before the advent of forensic DNA technology and other modern techniques. This is why in pictures of the Last Judgment the more prominent dead are shown wearing their crowns or miters to help distinguish them from the great mass of corpses. Out of context, even animal parts can be mistaken for those of humans, except by experts. Chaucer’s pardoner, one might remember, “hadd pigges bones” in a bottle that the gullible took to be human: the relics of a saint. And after not so long a time, even the bones fall apart: dust to dust. Erosion and oxidation see to that. Death proves even the rich man, as Sir Walter Raleigh observed on the scaffold, “a naked beggar which hath interest in nothing, but in the gravel that fills his mouth.” Everything is covered over “with these two narrow words, Hic jacet.”2

The corpse: the human body, at the edge of the abyss, soon reverts to the elements from which its physical being came and so reenters the great natural cycle of life and death. Modern ecologists welcome this, and the idea goes back to the origins of Western thinking on the matter. Heraclitus (d. 475 B.C.E.), the pre-Socratic philosopher, suggested that “corpses are more worth throwing out than dung.” They serve best that serve as fertilizer. It is a view with a long and checkered afterlife. A materialist chemist and philosopher got fired from his post at Heidelberg in the nineteenth century for saying the same thing. And we will hear it again among advocates of modern cremation and from those who think it only adds to greenhouse gases and that we should find away to treat bodies of humans as nature does the bodies of animals left to the forces of decomposition. But these pragmatic views have had little purchase over the ages. Diogenes the Cynic’s request to his friends that he be “flung out unburied” has been more challenging. He made this request not for instrumental reasons but because he thought it made no difference what became of him: “What harm then can the mangling of wild beasts do me if I am without consciousness?” he asked. Or, as Euripides’ Alkestis says to Admetus, right after she tells her that when he dies they will be together again: “Time will console you. The dead are nothing.” The body has always been disenchanted.3

The Cynic’s argument has had lots of admirers but has never been persuasive for very long. Just as the dead body has always been disenchanted, it has also always been enchanted: powerful, dangerous, preserved, revered, feared, an object of ritual, a thing to be reckoned with. For the living, for at least some time, it is always more than it is. “And yet…” and “except for…” have been the response to Diogenes’ view, echoing from as far back as we can go. There is no more protean or more generative human endeavor than arguing, in words and action, against it. Of course, comes the collective voice in thousands of different timbres, the dead are not refuse like the other debris of life; they cannot be left for beasts to scavenge. We need to live with them in more or less close proximity. They define generations, demarcate the sacred and the profane and more ordinary spaces as well, are the guarantors of land and power and authority, mirror the living to themselves, and insist on our temporal limits. The dead are witnesses to mortality. They hear us and we speak to them even if we know that they, like all base matter, are deaf and dumb. Bones address us from the gibbet in the words of the late medieval poet François Villon:

You see us cleaving together, five, six:
As for the flesh, which we nourished too much,
It is long since consumed and corrupted,
And we, the bones, have become ashes and powder.4

We address bones. We live with the dead.

Conversely, the willfully brutal disposal of the dead—the treatment of the corpse as carrion—is an act of extreme violence, an attack on the order and meaning we look to the dead to maintain for us. To make the obvious point: to treat a dead body as if it were ordinary organic matter—to leave it lie as if it were the body of a beast—or willfully to desecrate and mutilate it is to erase it from culture and from the human community: to deny the existence of the community from which it came, to deny its humanity. One of the most damning pictures of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was that of the dead, unattended, littering the streets of an American city. If we are to believe medieval bestiaries, hyenas, the most despised and perverted of beasts, purportedly dig up the dead to eat them (plate i). Eating human flesh for nourishment, for its protein alone, is a revolting sign of the collapse, or entire absence, of civilization. I am thinking here of the Donner Party, or the wreck of the Méduse, or Europeans’ understanding of the practices of some of the peoples of the New World. The practice of cannibalism for the nutritional value of the dead collapses the boundary between nature and culture. It probably does not exist; the exceptions in extremis prove the rule. Montaigne had already understood this back in the sixteenth century. He recognized that most of the cannibalism known in his day was ritualistic: magic. It was not a practice of semihumans radically different from Europeans but rather, as the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins says of cannibalism generally, a practice symbolic even if it was real. And as such, it too, at the margins of care for the dead, constitutes a rejection of Diogenes’ views.5

This book answers the question of why we consistently refuse Diogenes’ example—why we generally do not toss the dead over the wall for the beasts to devour—in two time registers: anthropological (part i) and historical (parts 2–4). The answer in the first of these both disregards time—we care for the dead because humans have always cared for our dead—and considers it on a scale that historians of the French Annales school called the longue durée. They were thinking of the time scale of climate, crops, and agricultural practices and of the patterns of life rooted in a material world that changed very slowly. These adamantine structures, the Annalistes thought, were the foundation for more temporally bound explanations of worldviews—what they called mentalités—and for événements, specific events that historians try to explain. I am thinking of the ways in which the material fact of the insignificance of dead bodies has been and is systematically and spectacularly forgotten, ignored, or reinterpreted through the millennia. Put differently, some irresistible power of the imagination, independent of any particular religious beliefs, blinds us to the cold reality of what a corpse really is. Or rather what it is not. We care about, care for, feel with a dead body, although we know that instantly or very soon after what we call biological death it notices nothing, cares for nothing, feels nothing. Part i plays down specific beliefs of specific groups of people at specific moments in history. It emphasizes continuity: of actors (the dead), of the kinds of work they do among the living, and of the foundational reasons we care about them.

I take this long or timeless view for four reasons. First, it lets me explain how and why very old stories are still being told in the everyday politics of today. It lets me compress time. Scarcely a week passed while I was writing this book without some new instance coming to public attention: On 9 June 2011, a black business­man and former city councilor in Stockton, California, was shocked to discover some thirty-six anonymous black bodies that had been exhumed and reburied. “When I went up to that gravesite,” he reports, “I feel like I could feel the presence of those people crying to get those things off of them.” The dead do not cry out.

“We know the dead are not able to speak,” writes an eighteenth-century clergyman, “for they are all silent in darkness.” They cannot see or walk or handle things with their hands, either. Yet they do speak, differently from the living. St. Paul preached to the Hebrews that “he being dead yet speaketh,” and more generally, Rev. Abel Styles concludes, “it is common in the scriptures for inanimate
things to be represented as speaking, as well as hearing" (fig. 1.2). It is still common; there are cultures today in which the living regularly speak to the dead. We endlessly invest the dead body with meaning because, through it, the human past somehow speaks to us.

Possessing actual dead bodies also still matters to us, as it did in the days of the early Church. National Public Radio recently reported that the children, by his first marriage, of Jim Thorpe, the great Native American football star and 1912 Olympic gold medal winner, were suing the town in Pennsylvania that was named after him and where his remains are buried under an impressive pink marble slab. They were joined in their suit by his tribe, the Sac and Fox Nation. The children wanted Thorpe’s body back. “Dad’s wish was that he be buried in Oklahoma,” they said. Wrong and irrelevant, said “the community of Jim Thorpe.” “We have a signed contract by his widow” (that is, by Thorpe’s second wife), who gave the town the body in 1957 in return for the promise that it would be renamed after her husband, responded a town father. The plaintiffs were perfectly content to let the town keep its name and memorial as long as they got the body. But of course that was unacceptable to the town: an empty tomb would be a sadly diminished tourist attraction. “We have the rights to the possession of Jim Thorpe’s body,” insists Jim Thorpe, the town. Medieval churches fought each other for centuries over the bodies of saints.

The same sort of historical escalator seems to be working in the opposite sorts of stories—those that are about the degradation of the corpse. They too have a very long pedigree and take on new resonance in new times. When followers of General Mohamed Aidid dragged the body of a dead American soldier through the streets of the Somali capital, Mogadishu, in October 1993, it evoked the same raw emotional response that Homer’s story of Achilles’ dragging the body of Hector over the plains of Troy did in the Iliad (figs. 1.3, 1.4). It was the violation that we recognize from Sophocles’ Antigone, in which Creon is horribly punished by the gods for leaving the body of Polynices unburied on the battlefield, prey to birds and animals; it speaks the language of the Nazi occupiers of Paris, who left the corpses of executed resistance fighters in the streets; it speaks to the terror in the hearts of Jamaican slaves excluded from burial for rebellion or for falling away from Christianity; it evokes the effect that the Spanish conquistadors hoped for when they left the bodies of the Aztec dead for the vanquished living to see. We recognize it in the English poor who rioted in protest against laws that made the bodies of criminals available for public dissection. The radically different eschatologies of Bronze Age or Golden Age Greece, sixteenth-century Mexico, eighteenth-century Jamaica or England, and twentieth-century France or Somalia or the United States seem to melt away.

Variants on the theme of the degraded corpse are stories, echoing one another over centuries, about getting the right dead body in the right place and excluding the wrong body from where it is not wanted. God, through miracles, cast unworthy bodies out of early Christian burial places; Jim Crow laws kept blacks out of segregated cemeteries; public opinion kept the body of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the Boston Marathon bomber, out of scores of cemeteries before he finally found a place at a small private burial ground in Virginia. And the state has its say about where a corpse can go. In 2011, the body of Hitler’s deputy, Rudolf Hess, buried in the Bavarian town of
Gadamer’s use of the phrase “elementary significance” puts me in mind of Claude Levi-Strauss’s Elementary Structures of Kinship, one of the most influential anthropology books of the twentieth century, which argues that the incest taboo stands at the border between nature and culture: a liminal state, a threshold. I take “abiding with the dead” in the same spirit, to be a sign of “a conduct of life that has spiraled out of the order of nature.” Burial is clearly not its only manifestation—language could be such a marker—nor is it the only way of abiding with bodies: cremating and entombing or scattering their ashes in holy places, for example, are others. It extends as well to the vast range of temporally more limited and less traceable forms of caring for the dead: all the ways in which we prepare them for more permanent disposition—for example, washing them (often the task of women in the Christian West), anointing them, dressing them, eviscerating and embalming them. And it includes the ritual forms of the disposition itself, the funeral in its endless variety. All of these acts and many others qualify and could be the subject of this book, but I concentrate on those that leave the most traces on the ground or in the historical records, those through which we live with the dead through time.

There is no chronological border marked “culture” on the human time scale at which stands a guardhouse marked “the care of the dead,” no clear frontier that, once crossed, definitively spirals the traveler “out of the order of nature.” The idea of such a moment is the heuristic creation of fictive anthropology meant to help us think about the foundations of the human symbolic order, to mark it as wondrous, to resist taking for granted the foundations of our existence. What actually happened in the distant past revolves around two related theoretical and empirical debates. The first is about dates: When did early hominids or humans start to care for their dead? The second is about meaning: Did beginning to care for the dead mark a cognitive border between prehistory and history, between one cognitive status and another higher one? I cannot and do not need to take sides in these sophisticated disputes. All I need for now is to observe that as far back as people have discussed the subject, care of the dead has been regarded as foundational—of religion, of the polity, of the clan, of the tribe, of the capacity to mourn, of an understanding of the finitude of life, of civilization itself. And, labor and sacrifice there is sought an abiding with the dead, indeed a holding fast of the dead among the living. ... We have to regard this in its most elementary significance. It is not a religious affair or a transposition of religion into secular customs, mores, and so on. Rather it is a matter of the fundamental constitution of human being from which derives the specific sense of human practice; we are dealing here with a conduct of life that has spiraled out of the order of nature.

Wunsiedel when he died in 1987, was exhumed and cremated; his ashes were scattered to the winds because his grave had become a shrine for thousands of neo-Nazis who gathered there on pilgrimage every year. The enchantment of this most profane of bodies was shattered only by reducing it into tiny particles of its constitutive chemistry and making it impossible to localize anywhere what remained.

The second reason I begin with the long anthropological view and return to it throughout the book is because it lets me respond to Diogenes’s challenge with a kind of answer not grounded in time or space but in more or less timeless truths. It lets me connect deep structures with historical contingencies. Three in particular are important for the rest of this book. First, there seems to be a universally shared feeling not only that there is something deeply wrong about not caring for the dead body in some fashion, but also that the uncared-for body, no matter the cultural norms, is unbearable. The corpse demands the attention of the living, however that attention is paid. We have a gut aversion to the bare, bereft dead body. Here is how an eighteenth-century clergyman put it: “The dead naturally tend to destroy the life of others,” he said, “and that is really the reason Men naturally abhor the sight or the touch of the dead... The natural Spirit of Life is afraid of a Dead Body and has an abhorrence of it,” which is why we cannot just toss it away, at least not in sight. Dead bodies are, as we will see in chapter 5, less dangerous to health than the living. But this does not detract from his main point. A celebrated seventeenth-century preacher explained why it was the duty of children to bury the bodies of their parents: it is, he said, “a great deformity to have a man’s corps lie above ground for no carcasse will bee more loathsome than a man’s if it lie unburied.” All sorts of reasons might be adduced for why it is so loathsome, but the preacher’s sensibility is widely shared across time and culture. It is echoed in the timeless psychoanalytic anthropology of Julia Kristeva: “The corpse (or cadavre: cadere, to fall), seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life... As in true theater without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in

is perhaps the fundamental phenomenon of becoming human. Burial does not refer to a rapid hiding of the dead, a swift clearing away of the shocking impression made by one suddenly stuck fast in a leaden and lasting sleep. On the contrary, by a remarkable expenditure of human
as far back as we can go, the archeological record seems to support the view that humans and their close hominid ancestors have cared for at least some of their dead. I do not know what this means in terms of human cognitive development or, more specifically, attitudes toward death. I do not think it matters. We must not, writes V. Gordon Childe, one of the pioneers of the study of prehistory, "imagine early hominids elaborating an eschatology and then acting on it." The deep emotions aroused by the drama of life and death "found expression in no abstract judgments, but in passionate acts. The acts were the ideas, not expressions of them." I think this is still true in our own age. But whether burial represents a great cognitive leap forward or not, for now, and for my purposes, I take Gadamer as being basically right.13

Third, the long anthropological view—deep time—allows me to offer another general argument against Diogenes that I will elaborate with much more historical specificity later. In 1907, Robert Hertz, a brilliant twenty-six-year-old Jewish student of the foundational sociological theorist Emile Durkheim and of the cultural anthropologist Marcel Mauss, wrote an enormously influential paper that showed that the dead have two lives: one in nature, the other in culture. There are the dead as bodies, the dead to which Diogenes limited himself: smell, putrefying flesh that had lost whatever had made it alive and that, like any other organic matter, was in the process of decay and had become food for scavengers. Soon these dead would be only bones, and eventually they would be nothing. But there is also another way to construe the dead: as social beings, as creatures who need to be eased out of this world and settled safely into the next and into memory. How this is done—through funeral rites, initial disposition of the body and often a redisposition or reburial, mourning, and other kinds of postmortem attention—is deeply, paradigmatically, and indeed foundationally part of culture. By contrast to death in nature—anachronistically speaking, biological death—which happens in a relatively brief amount of time, social death takes time even in the West, where the other kind is regarded as more or less instantaneous. We speak of the hour of our death. Death in culture takes time because it takes time for the rent in the social fabric to be renewed and for the dead to do their work in creating, recreating, representing, or disrupting the social order of which they had been a part. The ways in which the dead—understood as social beings—determine how we care for the dead body—the natural dead—is a central theme of part 1 and also informs the rest of the book. The relationship between the two conceptions of the dead—mere matter, on the one hand, and beings who have a social existence, on the other—is what allows bones, ashes, and names to do their work. "We humans," wrote Hertz, "are social beings grafted upon the physical individual," whose "destruction is tantamount to a sacrilege against the social order."11

The last reason that I begin with a long anthropological perspective is that it represents for me the foundation—the meta-reason—for all the specific reasons I will give for all the various changes that are the subject of most of this book. From there, it is turtles all the way down. As I said, there are thousands of explanations that can and have been given for why particular peoples at particular times care for the bodies of their dead in particular ways. Religious reasons, secular reasons, reasons predicated on metaphysics and reasons grounded in a materialist worldview, reasons generated by a variety of emotions and sensibilities, reasons that are difficult to articulate. There are reasons that are forever beyond us: we will never have a clue about why Neanderthals—at least some of them—ritually buried their dead. There are reasons that overreach the evidence. We can argue for a very long time about whether the focus on an afterlife really switched from the fate of the clan to that of the individual, from a concern for the cohesion of the group through time to an individual's relationship with the gods during the so-called Axial Age (ca. 800—200 B.C.E.), as some scholars of religion have claimed. There are intellectually well-articulated reasons. The medieval Church, for example, produced a highly elaborated theology to explain why the bodies of the special dead—saints—deserved extraordinary attention and why it was advantageous for the ordinary dead to be buried near them. There are whole libraries written to explain why the special dead do great things. The historical and anthropological literature is also filled with reasons of this sort for the things that the dead do in other times and places and for why we the living need to respond: for why we need to speak to them, feed them, pray for them, ingest them in some form, to name but a few possible obligations. I do not want to belittle or deny the importance of any of these; I myself cite them in the pages that follow, and I myself offer these sorts of reasons. Nonetheless, this book is fundamentally not a review of reasons but rather a commentary on them taken as a whole. It is about what the body of a Christian or a Buddhist saint and the body of Lenin share rather than what distinguishes them. It is about dead bodies as a class that I subsume, for want of a better label, under the term "the anthropological dead." In a sense, my account of why the dead matter is like the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher's (1768—1834) view of the "essence" of religion. It is, he thought, "neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling." It—like my subject—is not grounded in knowledge, science, morality, or metaphysics but rather in deep structures of intuition and feeling.14

But it also isn't. The book begins with and is supported by a cosmic claim: the dead make civilization on a grand and an intimate scale, everywhere and always: their historical, philosophical, and anthropological weight is enormous and almost without limit and compare. As such, death and the dead may not have a history in the usual sense but only more and more iterations, endless and
Most of this book is about history: the history of the work that the dead do in particular places, in particular times, and in particular ways. I ask two historical questions. First, how did the dead help to make what we think of as the modern world? And second, how was it possible for them to accomplish their work in the face of the putative disenchantment of our age? To put this second question differently: how have the kinds of reasons that we adduce for rejecting the dead changed in a variety of new circumstances?

My focus in much of what follows will be geographically limited to one small part of the world—western Europe and North America. In some stories—that of the cemetery, for example—I pay especially close attention to France and for a few pages also to Portugal, where the largest anti-cemetery riots of the nineteenth century took place; the French Revolution, a world historical event, appears in almost every part of the book; the history of modern cremation begins in Italy; I take many of my examples for the history of names from nineteenth-century Germany; I draw examples of name-bearing monuments from the United States and focus for a time on the NAMES project and its AIDS quilt. But for two reasons I return again and again to England. The first is the same one that drew Karl Marx to the British, and more specifically the English, case. Even if Britain was not the first modern society, it was the place where much of what we take to be characteristic of the modern world developed relatively early and in distinctive ways: an articulate and self-conscious bourgeoisie and working class; religious pluralism in the shadow of the Reformation and revolution; the attenuation of face-to-face relationships and autarkic communities; cosmopolitanism; commerce; industry. The world we have lost began to go missing there earlier than almost anywhere else.

But I do not want to put too much pressure on this; another historian might have chosen another country and, although the details would be different, her general story would be recognizable as the same as mine. The more important reason I focus on England is the need for close-up examination of the work of the dead—in a place, in an encounter, in a confrontation—if we are to understand its importance in general. The story I tell is local—has to be and is always local—at the same time as it is universal. A specific literary tradition comments on it; it grows out of particular people speaking and writing to one another in particular ways. After my more than forty years as a historian, England is the only place I know intimately enough to be able to recount the work of the dead with the granularity its history demands.

No part of this book is intended to be entirely freestanding. Leitmotifs keep reappearing; the story is iterative. But each of parts 2–4 is meant to address one main question; cumulatively my answers will cash out the claim that the work of the dead is to make culture and set the boundaries of our mortality.

Part 2 is about place and space. It asks, "Where are the dead?"—by which I mean "where, geographically, are their bodies?" Peter Brown argues for the importance of place with respect to the localization of a saint's body; his praecepta, the ground where heaven and earth are joined: Hic locus est, "This is the place." I will be concerned with this idea in broader contexts and for all sorts of reasons that have little to do with holiness in his sense. Specifically, in part 2 I want to show how the dominant resting place of the dead—the churchyard—came into being during the Middle Ages and explain why the modern cemetery largely supplanted it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Part 3 is about names. It asks, "Who are the dead?" After a survey of the deep time of the name and the list—a more detailed look at topics raised in part 1—it shows how and why, to an unprecedented extent, since the nineteenth century we have come to gather the names of the dead on great lists and memorials and, conversely, why being buried without a name (anonymously) has become so disturbing. It takes readers from a world of largely unmarked bodies to one in which hopelessly disembodied names—and even more, bodies bereft of names—are unbearable.

Finally, part 4 is about ashes. It asks, "What are the dead?" It shows how technologically sophisticated cremation—the rendering of the dead into indistinguishable inorganic matter—was begun as a modernist fantasy of stripping death of its history, which ultimately failed. Flesh and bones to ashes in less than two hours will not do.

The deep time of part 1 keeps reappearing, but most of this book is about a period stretching from the early Enlightenment to sometime in the twentieth century, roughly 1680–2000. I am not the first to argue that the work of the dead was, for better or (usually) worse, especially strenuous and effective in these centuries and, more important, that there was a break during the Enlightenment, which makes it a good place to begin the story of the dead in modern times. Michel Foucault, Philippe Ariès, Michel Vovelle, and Arthur Imhof, to take four exemplary and influential examples, all do it. And they all offer narratives of disappearance, disenchantment, loss, and secularization. For Imhof, the leading German historian of mortality, an early modern equanimity in the face of death disappeared during the Enlightenment. In the old regime of the churchyard, when children died soon after birth, parents could imagine them joining the heavenly host: "a kind of godly family planning." No more. The past two hundred years have witnessed a dramatic shortening of overall life expectancy from eternity to the threescore and ten, or at best fivescore, we might be allotted on earth. Imhof's title sums it up: Lost Worlds. For the Marxist historian
Vovelle, the response is good riddance: the decline of testamentary bequests for masses for the dead that he documents is evidence for large-scale secularization. Humanity is less in thrall to a Church that for millennia had used masses for the dead to keep the masses of the living enthralled. This is a longtime favorite trope of anticlericalism. For the deeply conservative and devoutly Catholic Arès, the Enlightenment was disastrous: an epidemic of fear gripped Europe as the dying came to worry about premature burial, a result of doctors telling their patients that death was nothing but the extinction of even the tiniest flame of life. How would one really know? In the nineteenth century, sentimentalism and excessive personal grief replaced more communal and religious understandings of dying and a deeper, metaphysically rooted account of death itself. By the twentieth century, a great silence had descended; one could not speak about death at all. (Aries bases this last point on the work of the influential English anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer.) Finally, for Foucault, death in the Enlightenment gave way to what he called the regime of life; the clinical gaze served to embrace bodies in a new web of power/knowledge that regulated life in its most intimate corners. All of these are narratives of disappearance.4

Mine is not. It is written under the sway of anthropology informed by history, a story of the ways in which the presence of the dead enchants our purportedly disenchanted world, of the reinvention of enchantment in more democratic forms. It is about a new and modern magic that we can believe in, and how layers of meaning from the deep past lie beneath the present, waiting to be reused and reimagined. In fact the dead have never been more prominent: from the tumble of churchyards to great acres of cemeteries, from a very small number of grand funerals making claims on public space to the funeral as a constitutive event for all sorts of communities, from anonymity to names. Even ashes have taken on new life.

I invite the reader to imagine herself as an archeologist around the year 3000, a thousand or so years from now, excavating a European city—or a city of North or South America, or Australia; much of the colonial world would work, and so might Singapore or Shanghai with some of the details changed—whose destruction could be dated with some precision to the year 1900: a city frozen in time like Pompeii. She would look, as her professional predecessors had, for evidence about what that city's inhabitants did with their dead, those strange artifacts that speak so powerfully of what matters to a civilization. Were she engaged with late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, she would be looking for the concentration of graves in the midst of human habitation, at a gathering-in of the dead from a variety of locations, each with a deep history. But archeologists a millennium from now will be looking at the ruins of the Western civilization that supplanted the old regime of the dead that had grown up by the eighth or ninth century.

Instead of the ruins of many small and not very imposing churchyards with a few modest tombs and a small number of grand ones inside the remaining walls of an adjacent church, archeologists would find at the outskirts of the early twentieth-century city huge expanses, hundreds and even thousands of acres in size, packed full of grand monuments difficult to distinguish from those of earlier civilizations: Egyptian, Greek, Roman, medieval Irish, European baroque, in relatively pure form but, more likely, each one in a strange bricolage of historical elements. Almost all of these would be stone, but perhaps by some extraordinary circumstance a great iron mausoleum might have survived if only in traces of ferrous oxide. Maybe even a photograph preserved in glass, like a fly in amber. It might well be puzzling to our excavator that instead of a tidy progression of styles through the ages there had been a sort of historical compression in which all of them came into being at roughly the same time. No churches would be found nearby.

In 1750, all the graves would have been oriented toward the east, toward Jerusalem, to greet the resurrection. In 1900 or 2000, they were oriented toward walkways or topographical features—views of a valley or a river—that might still be visible. Among these great tombs there would be many contemporaneous mass graves with hundreds of unnoticed and unmarked bodies in each. Places like this—the remains of Père Lachaise in Paris, or Highgate and Woking in London, or Underhill in Hull, or Olsdorf in Hamburg, or Rockwood in Sydney, or the large, beautiful, classical Jewish cemeteries at Weißensee in Berlin or Bracka Street in Lodz, or the hundreds more that had mysteriously appeared on the European urban landscape during the course of a century and, increasingly, in the countryside as well between 1800 and 1900—would demand serious attention. So too would national cemeteries and burial places all over the world, from Washington, D.C., to the gathering of the Communist elite cadre in Shanghai—all of these constituted new, self-consciously crafted communities of the dead.

Further excavation might reveal in each of these cities the ruins of something else having to do with the dead: buildings in the Romanesque, Tudor Gothic, neoclassical, or some other historical style beneath which were the outlines of high-tech furnaces that bear a remarkable resemblance to steelmaking ovens found in other excavated industrial sites. Great—unbelievable—luck in the exploration of Woking, near London, would turn up intact a modest building with an overly large chimney looking like an early Industrial Revolution ironworks, in which the British Cremation Society incinerated its members before the far grander facility at Golders Green was built in 1902. Perhaps these ruins would be rightly interpreted as crematoria, but that would be difficult at many sites because their designers had intended to hide what happened there. The templelike structure above the ground dedicated to the living was meant to disrupt the image of
factory for the destruction of bodies that the regenerating furnaces below ground suggested. In fact, the whole matter would be puzzling: nothing like it could be found in any late-eighteenth- or early-nineteenth-century sites; mountains of evidence from the graveyards of almost two millennia before would have borne witness to the fact that western Europeans had stopped cremating their dead well before the year 1000, and much earlier in most places; there are no identifiable cremations after that as there had been in Neolithic, classical, and northern medieval sites before that time.16

And finally, our archeologist would find—assuming that weather and water had not eaten away at the stones—millions of names on gravestones and tens of thousands on very large, unprecedented, name-bearing monuments. If the excavation were of the western European countryside or the Gallipoli peninsula, the battle lines of the almost forgotten Great War would be traceable through individual names and lists of names. Our explorer might even come upon the ruins of the Vietnam Memorial. The AIDS quilt would have disintegrated, although perhaps some photographs might have survived. Perhaps the millions of names of the Jewish dead would have survived on some list: at Yad Vashem or at smaller national sites. There would be names everywhere. All this would be startling to our imagined archeologist. Between the mound and stele at Marathon and the first national cemetery at Gettysburg there had been nothing like this. Names would be relatively scarce in the churchyards of 1750 or 1800, but in the civilian cemeteries excavated from 1900, they would be everywhere.

Each of these developments, literary sources might suggest, was the result of some problem solved (an excess of urban bodies, hygienic considerations in the context of new medical knowledge) or of some new ideal or belief or taste (democracy, nationalism, death understood as sleep in beautiful surroundings, neoclassical aesthetics). And interpretations built on this sort of evidence would not be wrong. But I invite my reader to take a broader view, which is how I hope to connect my accounts of deep time with my more historical sections: to take the new sites from 1900 as seriously as we take ancient and early Christian archeology in our effort to understand the slow decline and eventual assimilation of one civilization by another. Something momentous has happened. The ruins I am imagining do more than reflect views about death; they are evidence for the social and cultural work of the dead in our era and other eras.

I want to make clear that I am not being delusional by claiming that the dead do work, in the sense that a physicist would understand the term: “weight lifted through a height,” displacement of a mass over some distance in the direction of a force. Diogenes had a point: the dead—or in any case their bodily remains—can do nothing because they are nothing. They cannot even lift a stick to fend off beasts. Consequently, it would seem that they could not do the far more demanding work I have assigned them. With the exception of ghosts and other unquiet spirits—that is, with the exception of the not-quite-dead or the differently dead to which I will return (see chapter 2)—the dead as represented by the dead body are dead. They therefore do not work (or play) in the space and time of our world. This is the fundamental fact about them; it is the meaning of the universal great divide between life and death. Whatever the dead do or suffer, it is somewhere else or, in the case of spirits, in some other form. The living have stepped into their shoes, taken their property, married their wives or husbands, and in many other ways ushered them out.

My inquiry is thus, in a double sense, different from inquiries about what work the inhabitants of Berlin, Beijing, or even the farthest and most exotic reaches of the earth do. There are many kinds of the not-quite-dead: the zombies that are making such a comeback in our popular culture; the insistent spirit of Hamlet’s father; the souls that cry out in purgatory; the corporeal, grotesque, monstrous undead Norse draugar, who are not spirits or imagos of the dead, as St. Augustine thought ghosts were, but rather physical beings that walk after they are dead and can wreak destruction; the Chinese dead who walk not alone but in droves to their appropriate burial places; the mournful “shadow” of Odysseus’s mother, who slips from his arms and explains that he cannot hold her because a “spirit, rustling, flitters away. . . flown like a dream.” Maybe they can work in some of the ways the living do. But these are my subjects only in the ways in which they affect how we regard the really dead, the remains of the dead. All of the dead, including the not-quite-dead, are different from us, whatever else they might be. It is precisely because of this that they are central to making culture, to creating the skein of meaning through which we live within ourselves and in public.17

The history of the work of the dead is a history of how they dwell in us—individually and communally. It is a history of how we imagine them to be, how they give meaning to our lives, how they structure public spaces, politics, and time. It is a history of the imagination, a history of how we invest the dead—again, I will be speaking primarily of the dead body—with meaning. It is really the greatest possible history of the imagination. In any given instant, the living may well be able to give an account of their beliefs about where, who, or what the dead are, or what death is, or how the dead might operate in this world or some other: roughly speaking, “attitudes toward death” or “religious beliefs” or “beliefs about the dead.” But the power of bodies is remarkably independent of views of this sort. If this is the case, it might seem more appropriate in our disenchanted world to speak not of the work of the dead but rather of the living: we—not the somehow revenant dead—are the ones doing the real work. Point taken. Let me therefore be clearer. I am offering a social history of what real living people in the depths of

16 Introduction

17 The Work of the Dead
time—and especially from the eighteenth century on—did with and through real
dead bodies, and a cultural history of what their acts meant and mean to them. 18

But the dead remain active agents in this history even if we are convinced they
are nothing and nowhere. Their ontological standing is of minor importance.
They do things the living could not do on their own. Federico García Lorca once
claimed, “Everywhere else death is an end. Death comes and we draw the curtain.”
But not in Spain. “A dead man is more alive [there] than the dead of any other country
in the world.” I do not want to dispute national ranking, although with the mas-
sive post-Franco exhumations, Lorca has a point. But although league standings
change over time, the dead are alive everywhere. (In late November 2014, Span-
ish archeologists began digging on a three-hundred-square-meter plot where
they believe Lorca’s body is buried; an earlier attempt to find him failed in 2009,
and no one knows if this one will succeed.) Living bodies do not have the same
powers as dead ones. “The most dangerous person at a funeral,” as the histo-
rian Richard Cobb once observed, “is the body in the coffin.” An empty tomb, a
grave marker with no body or no ashes beneath it, a funeral procession with only
an empty coffin, a faux graveyard, fake bones are all greatly diminished: Hamlet
without the Prince. A purposely empty tomb—a cenotaph—or an empty coffin
have power precisely because they lack what is universally expected. 19

The charisma of the dead—or charismata, as theologians might put it, the gift of
God to man for the building of the church—exists in our age as in other ages not
because of the persistence of old wine in new bottles (we are all still enchanted)
but because we have never been disenchanted. This is because the care of the
dead governs even where specific beliefs have no purchase. Let me end with two
sets of stories that illustrate this point and also the ways in which the founda-
tional anthropological claims with which I began are still at work in the unlikeli-
est modern situations.

The first begins in the cold early hours of Tuesday, 24 November 1954, still
deepest night, when grave diggers exhumed the body of Karl Marx and most of
his family from an obscure resting place and moved them two hundred yards up
the hill to what was then—and still is today—one of the most prominent places
in London’s Highgate Cemetery. Lenchin (the German diminutive of Helene)
Delmuth, the family’s longtime servant and the mother of an illegitimate son gen-
erally believed to have been sired by Marx, had been buried, and was moved, with
them. Eleanor Marx was reunited with her parents in their new location after a
long, sad separation in death. She was cremated after she committed suicide in
1898. Her common-law husband, Edward Aveling, whose infidelity in secretly
marrying someone else may have contributed to her despair, did not want her
ashes, so they came into the hands of one of the founders of the Socialist League.
He attached a dated and signed note to the urn that identified its contents as

Eleanor’s remains and delivered it to the office of the Socialist Democratic Fed-
eration, where it remained until 1920 when it was moved to the headquarters
of the British Communist Party; only to be confiscated there in a police raid the
next year and kept in custody by the authorities for more than a decade. In 1933,
they gave the urn back, and it was installed in the Marx Memorial Library, where it
rested for a time in the room in which Lenin had worked between April 1902
and May 1903. Finally, in the late fall of 1954, the ashes were moved one last time:
to the new grave that had been made in Highgate. 20

Karl Marx’s body had led a more sedentary existence. Russia had asked for it
in 1922 so as to put it in a place of honor near the Kremlin, but the British Home
Office refused, claiming that it could not obtain the required permission for an
exhumation from Marx’s next of kin. This may have been the real reason. The
Home Office had no problem allowing the ashes of Leonid Krasin, the People’s
Commissar for Foreign Trade, who died in London in 1925, to be sent back home
to be buried in the Kremlin Wall. When, more than thirty years later, the Marx
Memorial Library asked to move the great man, it was more successful. Three
great-grandchildren living in France consented to the exhumation, and the Home
Office gave its permission this time but on the condition that the exhumation be
carried out secretly and under cover of darkness. For three days after the reburial,
“pilgrims” apparently stood unknowingly before an empty grave. On 27 Novem-
ber, the move was made public. It had been very costly. The Library paid £800
for the new site, exhumation, and reburial, and a huge amount, £5,000, for a
new tomb: a granite plinth with a bronze bust of Marx on top that was designed
by the well-known Communist sculptor Lawrence Bradshaw. The epitaph reads:
“Workers of All Lands Unite.”21

Hic locus est—here is the place. Enemies attacked it. A bomb explosion on 14
May 1970, caused £500 damage, one of at least five incidents of vandalism that
year. “It naturally attracts the attention of persons of various political persua-
sions particularly of the younger element of the ‘Right wing’,” said the commis-
sioner of police in explaining that the site was vulnerable and that only a full-
time guard—totally impractical under the circumstances—could really keep it
safe. And adherents made it a sacred site. Around Marx’s body the gravestones
of comrades gathered as if his were the tomb of a saint: Yusof Dadoo, the South
African Communist leader; Mansure Hekmat, the founder of the Communist
Party of Iran, a Marxist revolutionary of Maoist persuasion who would not make
his peace with the Islamic revolution and died in exile in London in 2002; “Clau-
dia Vera Jones, Born Trinidad, 1915; Died London, 25 December 1964, Valiant
Fighter against racism and imperialism who dedicated her life to the progress of
socialism and the liberation of her own black people.” also the founder of both
the Notting Hill Carnival and Britain’s first black newspaper; Paul Foot, “writer
and revolutionary”; and Ralph Miliband, the Jewish “Writer Teacher Socialist” and father of the current Labour Party leader, are all nearby. So is Ian Dorans, “1939–2007, Loving Family Man and Socialist to the End,” who, with more famous comrades from the Workers Party of Scotland, robbed banks to pay for the hoped-for workers’ revolution. Eric Hobsbawm, the greatest Marxist-historian of his generation, lies only twenty-five feet away. He died on 1 October 2012 and was cremated, although this is not evident from his tomb: an upright, slightly arched tablet standing at the head of a low, full-size coffin with a stone top as if it actually held a body. Visitors have left small stones on the grave, a Jewish gesture that is probably meant to show that someone had stopped by but may also unconsciously echo the ancient practice of putting large stones in front of tombs so that the dead would stay in place (figs. 1.5, 1.6). Some would say that my friend Raphael Samuel, a brilliant, secular Jewish, atheist communist historian, who is buried a little farther away from Marx’s tomb, to the north and up a gentle hill, hidden by trees, is part of this company. Comrades who were at his funeral certainly have thought so. And they are not entirely wrong; he did want to be buried near friends, many of whom were in the Party. But, Samuel and his wife chose his gravesite for other reasons, reasons of the sort that will find echoes throughout this book. Highgate is steeped in the history of London, whose history he had studied all his life; it is near where he grew up and near where relatives live today; and in Highgate they found a plot where they could be buried together, “connubial” in the grave.22

Marx might have found this very peculiar. And so should we. He certainly would have had a hard time explaining philosophically why his tomb had become a pilgrimage site. As a student, he had written his Ph.D. dissertation on the ancient materialist philosopher Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.), who offers the most influential and long-lived argument in the Western tradition for death as a complete and permanent annihilation of body and soul. What remains of Marx or anyone are atoms—and nothing, but nothing, else. Epicurus would have given two reasons for this. First, there is no such thing as an immaterial soul that might be able to subsist as a version of the person after death. Once dead, there was no Karl Marx anywhere. And second, the material soul that enlivens a body—Marx’s body, any body—could have no independent life. This means that to be dead is for the story to be over. The body loses its sentience when the soul departs—the defining moment of death in all Western and most other traditions until the advent of modern biological accounts—and, according to Epicurus, so does the departed soul. It was itself sentient only as a consequence of its having been “somehow confined within the rest of the frame.” Soul and body need each other; neither can exist on its own. When specialized corporeal soul atoms leave the body at the moment of death, they both become matter of the sort they were before. A dead person instantly leaves the world of culture when its two kinds of atoms are sundered; she becomes exactly what she was before she was born, when she did not exist: plain matter. There was, in other words, no rational argument that could be given within the Marxist intellectual tradition that the place where Marx’s remains rested was different from any other place.23

Then why would the comrades act as if they did not believe this? Lucretius, the classical philosopher who most faithfully developed Epicurus’s ideas, removes any possible philosophical justification. Even if in the infinity of time all our atoms could somehow come together again in exactly the same form as they were before we died—we recognize this as an improbable thermodynamic event—the reconstituted being would not be us because “there would [have been] a break in consciousness.” The new us, the reassembled replica, would no more be us than we are some possible earlier version(s) of ourselves made from the same atoms. Death ends time, just as birth begins it. And so Marx’s atoms will never again be Marx. And it does not make a difference where they lie. There is no praesentia—no real presence, no power, no juncture of the profane and sacred—as at a saint’s tomb, and none of the people buried around Marx would have claimed otherwise. Nothing that any of them would have believed about death, the body, or the afterlife explains why they or their friends wanted their bodies to be where they are, near the tomb of the founder of historical materialism, the paradigmatic modern philosophy of disenchantment.24

And yet there they are. Why? Not because of ideas or dogma but rather owing to delusions of the sort Lucretius exposed: the inability to recognize that what has befallen others will befall us. Complete oblivion. But more specifically, there are the two sets of reasons that inform this book. First, there is the recognition, even if unspoken, of the power of the dead in deep time to make communities,
to do the work of culture, to announce their presence and meaning by occupying space. Marx's actual body is necessary for this to happen; name-bearing stones would not have sufficed for those who surrounded him. Second, there are the sorts of historically contingent reasons that make it possible for these men and women to announce their membership in this particular fellowship (cosmopolitan socialism) in this place (Highgate) with ashes produced by cremation in technologically sophisticated modern ovens. Bodies create a community of memory; visitors to these bodies confirm it; together they make a claim on space and on the attention of the living. We are here. We the dead even speak, as do Villon's skeletons on the gibbet.

The dead contributed also to the fall of communism and the building of something different for the same combination of reasons. "Many thousands of otherwise politically disenchanted people," writes the historian of the exhumation of Bela Bartok from a New York cemetery and his reburial in Budapest in 1988, watched a "publicity extravaganza" that occupied the media for four months and affected how an elite understood the relationship between the state and civil society, and between the Hungarian state and Europe more particularly. In 1989, the bones of Imre Nagy brought down the regime. They were translated, in a massive procession using props from the local opera company's Aida production, from a pit in the Budapest Zoo to the cemetery where the heroes of 1848 were buried. Janos Kadar, the old-fashioned, hard-line Communist who had ordered Nagy murdered after the failed 1956 revolution, feared for decades that the very mention of his dead enemy's name was dangerous. As it turned out, his body was more so than his necronym.25 And the dead contribute to creating continuities between the pre- and the post-Communist past, knitting together the parts of a fractured history. Lenin's body—a miracle of the embalmer's art—still seems indispensable to the political theology of Russia, as it was to that of the Soviet Union. A missing Romanian body makes the case with more chronological precision. In 2003, the mayor of Palermo, Sicily, promised his counterpart in Palermo's sister city, Timisoara, that he would do everything he could to repatriate the bones of Nicolae Bălcescu, "friend of Garibaldi" and hero of the 1848 Revolution, who had died in exile. The mayor's best efforts were not enough; after 150 years of fruitless searches for his remains, Bălcescu's body was irretrievably lost. He could not be found in 1977, when the Romanian Communist government sent a "shock" team of historians to Italy under an arrangement made at the highest governmental levels; he could not be found in 1942, when new documents were discovered that held out false hope of recovery; he could not be found in 1921 or in 1925, when two right-wing government missions looked for him in another Palermo site; he could not be found in 1863, when a delegation led by the hero's friend, the academician Nicolae Ionescu, looked for his body in a common grave and concluded that the case was hopeless. The search had begun in 1850, when the leader of a newly united Romania declared that those who "gave their lives for the good and glory of their country" deserved acknowledgment and expressed the wish that "the ashes of Nicolae Bălcescu...dead in the bitterness of exile, be brought back to the Romanian land." But if one body was missing in the making of post-1989 Europe, a hundred others were found and repatriated; new polities, like new religions, need the dead just as old polities and old religions do.26

The story only becomes more elaborated in our own day and more global in postcolonial contexts. For example, claims and counterclaims for the corpse of one of Kenya's most distinguished lawyers, Silvanus Melea Otieno, shook his homeland. He had wanted to be buried near Nairobi and his marital home, in a Western-style cemetery. His highly educated Kikuyu wife wanted to respect his wishes. But members of his Luo clan claimed the body for a more traditional burial in his native village, far from the sophisticated urban world of which he had been a part. At stake when the Kenyan Supreme Court decided the fate of Otieno's remains were the rights of women (his wife in particular); the role of tradition versus modernity and African versus European customs; the competing interests of tribe, of natal and of marital family, and of nation; and the meaning of the dead man's life and learning. Stories of his quoting Shakespeare in Nairobi bars were offered to the court as evidence for where his body should go. In the end, ethnic interests prevailed; he was buried at Nyamila six months after he died. Not since the great days of the medieval relic trade has there been such a high level of traffic in dead bodies as in the modern era nor such contention over their fate. Marx's translation in 1954 was but one episode.27

I end with my own strange story of caring for the dead. Sometime in the early nineteenth century, my great-great-great-great-grandfather, the rabbi David ben Elizer, acquired a surname. The story of how and why this happened I tell in a general way in chapter 7. That new name soon acquired a "u" and became mine. I have visited his grave on a wooded knoll that rises a few score meters from the flat Silesian farmland (fig. 1.7). I know where it is because of the studies of German researchers on the Jews of this area and Polish scholars of Jewish history and culture who are transcribing names from Jewish gravesstones as a way of recovering the world that the Shoah had permanently destroyed. This rabbi, born David ben Elizer, a man of considerable learning, secular as well as religious, spent his whole life in a tiny village now called Miejsce, then Stadel, set among potato fields seventy kilometers southeast of Wroclaw, then called Breslau. It had both a Protestant and a Catholic church, between which sat the manor house of the local lord who, perhaps because his people already had pluralistic allegiances, welcomed a third religion. The survival of the rabbit's tombstone is remarkable. It sat in the
pathway of the Russian army's march to Festung Breslau, but, except for a few pockmark bullet holes, it has little to show for its experiences. It is unusual only in that its long Hebrew epitaph in the third person turns to a familiar second-person "you," and addresses the rabbi as "you who managed in wisdom for thirty-six years... you will harvest with joy." The writer imagined the dead man listening, although there would have been little left of him by the time the tombstone was set. David's wife, like Pip's mother at the beginning of Great Expectations, gets little more than "and also..." with a few words about her virtues. Abraham's first real estate purchase in Canaan may have been a cave for Sarah's burial, but from then on one hears much more about the tombs of the patriarchs.

I came upon my great-grandparents' graves by accident when my wife and I toured the German Jewish cemetery in Wroclaw (fig. 1.8). There is an irony in the fact that a Jewish burial place is one of the very few public signs in Wroclaw that there had ever been Germans in what is now a thoroughly Polish city. The other so-called German ones were unceremoniously obliterated at the first opportunity after 1945, as were almost all signs that in 1871 Breslau was the sixth-biggest city of the Kaiser Reich. Dead Jews are what little remains to witness to this history. My great-grandparents—Siegfried and Anna—are in good company: a Greek helmet adorns the gravestone of a fallen Jewish officer of the Great War, there are monuments to soldiers who died at Sedan in the Franco-Prussian War and to one who died in the Napoleonic Freiheitskriege. The parents of the Carmelite saint Edith Stein are here, as are those of Fritz Haber, the Jewish Nobel Prize-winning chemist who invented poison gas; Ferdinand Lasalle, the founder of what became the German Socialist Party, is twenty meters away, and Abraham Geiger, the founder of Reform Judaism, is not far distant. This is a cemetery of the sort I describe in chapter 5, a new kind of space where the Jews of the Enlightenment proclaimed their cultural modernity.

I have been to my grandfather's grave. He died in Hamburg in 1927 and is buried in the Jewish section of Hamburg's great, parklike Friedhof Ohlsdorf (fig. 1.9). Where he lies is largely indistinguishable in its architecture and landscape from the adjacent Christian areas. I knew well what his black marble tombstone with his name in Jugendstil lettering—"Dr. Med. Walther Laqueur"—looked like, because a picture of it had stood on my grandmother's desk as I was growing up.

When my father died in 1984, he was cremated, the first in my lineage to be so disposed of. I am not sure why his father had chosen not to be; scientifically minded and self-consciously modern German, Swiss, and Italian Jews often chose cremation in the early twentieth century to show their modern bona fides. Nationalist and secularist though he was, he was also culturally conservative and probably did not relish the idea that his widow would have to fight with rabbinical authorities to be buried among Jews. In the 1920s, cremation was still a radical gesture, not just to Jews but also to others. My father specifically wanted to be cremated. As a pathologist, he was under no illusion about what dead bodies really were.

We mixed his ashes into the dirt of a flowerbed by the lake cottage in Virginia where his life ended (fig. 1.10). Some of my mother's ashes are now there as well—those that we did not cast upon the waters where she loved to swim and where, it was said at her memorial, her spirit dwelled. Her sister's, my Tante Eli's, ashes were put there two years before my father's. To be truthful, the body of a beloved dog is right next to the flowerbed. Frederick the Great wanted to be buried with his dogs, Byron wanted to lie next to Boatswain, but in general the
communities of the human and the animal dead were until very recently quite separate. The bodies by the lake were a modern lot.

More than a decade after we mixed my father's ashes with the clay soil of Virginia, I was invited to lecture in Germany. My wife suggested that I take some of his ashes with me and mix them with those of his father, my grandfather, in Hamburg. I replied that, as she well knew, I had no ashes; they were by now leached away by the snows of winter and rains of summer. A body yields little more than a milk carton in volume of ash; nothing of him could possibly be left. After some discussion, I finally decided to take a small bag of dirt in which there might have been a homeopathically small number of inorganic molecules that had once been in my father and to mix these with the soil of his father's grave. This gesture of repatriation would have been regarded by my father as an act of rank superstition.

And so, I suppose, it was. If there were any molecules that had been part of my father's body in the bag of dirt, they were indistinguishable from the soil amendments one adds to one's garden: mostly calcium phosphate and calcium carbonate, some sodium and potassium salts, trace elements of this and that. But it did seem right that some of him—however attenuated and basely material—should be back where he had once felt both comfortable and troubled; and it did make me understand that he was dead. And it united him with the father he had lost when he was seventeen, with whom he had been exceptionally close. It seemed a gesture that mirrored my insistence on giving lectures in German in Germany, even to an audience like that at the Kennedy Institute for North American Studies in Berlin, where everyone's academic English is better than my academic German. Like the return of dirt pretending to be ashes pretending to be a body pretending to bear some relationship to a person I had loved, there is little reason has to say about all this. Such is the work of culture.

I number myself among the unenchanted. I take the work of the dead to be perhaps the greatest and most mysterious triumph of culture. There is, I am sure, nothing "real" behind it. If the things magicians did were in fact "real," they would lose much interest to us moderns. If we watched their shows always thinking of the tricks that were being played on us, they would become empty and cold. Unmasking may have its place, but this is not my purpose. Instead, as Dave Hickey writes of a show in Las Vegas, we watch elephants disappear without inquiring how this is done and we listen to a chorus asking that they be made to reappear in the same spirit. We understand that "the whole tradition of disappearing things and restoring them is located where it should be: in rituals of death and resurrection." We "simply take pleasure in seeing the impossible appear possible and the invisible made visible. Because if these illusions were not just illusions, we should not be what we are: mortal creatures who miss our dead friends, and thus can appreciate levitating tigers and portraits by Raphael for what they are—songs of mortality sung by the prisoners of time."  

We—we moderns and, I suspect, some of those who came before us, if they could have understood what we were talking about—have come to make meaning with corpses knowing that, if pushed very hard, we would have to admit that the work of the dead is, in this sense, magic. But it is magic that we can believe without an ironic shrug. We can and do comfort ourselves in new ways in a post-metaphysical age; we still keep the dead present, however tenuously, among the living; we still make and remake communities persisting through time as we have always done.

I will claim that what is modern about the work of the dead in our era is this: a protean magic that we believe despite ourselves. I think that death is not and has never been a mystery; the mystery is our capacity as a species, as collectivities and as individuals, to make so very much of absence and specifically of the poor, naked, inert dead body.
PART I

THE DEEP TIME OF THE DEAD
Some day I will go to Aarhus
To see his peat-brown head,
The mild pods of his eye-lids,
His pointed skin cap.

In the flat country near by
Where they dug him out,
His last gruel of winter seeds
Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for
The cap, noose and girdle,
I will stand a long time.
Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body,

Trove of the turfcutters'
Honeycombed workings.
Now his stained face
Reposes at Aarhus.

SEAMUS HEANEY, "THE TOLLUND MAN"
the part that follows. I hope here to connect the cosmic with the particular from antiquity to the beginning of the modern age.

There is another more specific feature of deep time beyond the sheer cultural weight it bears: its jagged stratigraphy. Bodies of the dead that were put to rest or abandoned hundreds or even thousands of years ago are thrust up into the present by the human equivalent of geological forces. These forgotten dead may have always been, or have become, nothing. In this state they long ago ceased doing any cultural work, if ever they did any. But then they are brought to the surface, to the notice of the living, by a variety of circumstances; they are discovered. Some in this category would include the bodies archeologists dig up and put in museums or laboratories; they have become the talismans of a lost civilization or objects of scientific study. These dead are something entirely different from what they had been before, changed from subject to object by the weight of the past.

Others emerge from oblivion to a new life as they, or more precisely their bodies, are reborn as cultural beings of a new sort. Tollund Man, killed in a fourth-century B.C.E. bog and found by peat cutters in 1950, is exemplary (plate 2). Almost magically, because of the high acidity and anaerobic conditions of where he had fallen, we know what he ate as his last meal, we know what he wore when he died—a cap of wool and sheepskin; we know how he died—he was strangled. We do not know why. Perhaps he was executed; more likely, scholars say, he was a human sacrifice. Most of his tribe died violent deaths; a few may have lost their way and fallen into a bog. Long lost and forgotten, he now has a story; glimpses of his personhood can be read from his tanned remains. He touches a great poet.

'Trove of the turfcutters'
Honeycombed workings.
Now his stained face
Reposes at Aarhus.

More generally, bog people have come to live as an important community in the making of Danish identity and that of other northern lands.¹

Even archaeological specimens, far less possessed of their humanity, have also returned to culture. I am thinking here not only of paleo-Americans—the bodies from Wizards Beach, Spirit Cave, and most famously Kennewick Man, discovered on 28 July 1996, that had lain forgotten for ten thousand years—but also of many other more recent remains that are poised today between the laboratories of anthropologists who study the origins of human settlement in North America and Native Americans who regard them as the remains of ancestors to be buried in religious ceremonies.²

Other communities of the historically forgotten and despised are returned to life by the living as they seek to redeem the past. In 1794, a slave burial ground in lower Manhattan was covered over by twenty-five feet of dirt and made ready for the urban development that soon followed. The cemetery and its bodies then passed into oblivion. After almost two centuries, in October 1991, much to the surprise of the General Services Administration, whose environmental impact survey of the site where it was building a $275 million federal office building found no human remains, the first of what eventually numbered 420 skeletons was unearthed. These turned out to belong to slaves, a small number of the tens of thousands who were buried on the island. Construction stopped. Ultimately, the African American community and its allies managed to force a radically altered design for the proposed building that created space for what became in 2006 the African Burial Ground National Monument: "a truly spiritual and sacred memorial to the African experience and legacy."

Perhaps the possibility of historical undoing implicit in the redemption of slave graves and of lost time somehow recovered in our engagement with the bog people is a product of the modern age with its sense of progress and of loss. But even if these imaginative possibilities are especially strong after the late eighteenth century, the stratigraphic emergence of bodies is not. Dead bodies have gone in and out of being among the living for a very long time. The sixteenth-century antiquarian Antonio Bosio discovered some four thousand long-forgotten bodies in the vast catacombs of early Christian Rome; no one had visited them for eight hundred years. He essentially created systematic necroarcheology, a combination of erudition and excavation, to bring these dead—these bodies of martyrs, Bosio thought—to light and thus to map a new sacred geography of the Eternal City. More than a millennium after their deaths, these bodies worked mightily in the cause of the Catholic Reformation. The impulse to recover the special if not the ordinary dead goes back to the beginning of the writing of history. Herodotus tells of the successful Spartan effort to find the bones of Orestes, without which, so saith the Delphic Oracle, they would fail in the battle against the Tageans. In deep time the strata of the dead emerge.³

Finally, deep time allows us to see the extent to which the work of the dead is made possible by accretion, by the building of layer upon layer of meaning. Classicism is the perfect example, but there will be many other cases. Here is one particularly mixed-up and local case of the rich Cambridgeshire antiquarian John Underwood, who died in 1733. He insisted in his will that he be carried to his grave, not to the sound of hymns and the tolling of the passing bell, but to the voices of six friends singing the twentieth ode from the second book of the first-century Augustan poet Horace.

No dirges for my fancied death;
No weak lament, no mournful stave;

The Deep Time of the Dead
All clamorous grief were waste of breath,
And vain the tribute of a grave.

He ordered that a Greek New Testament be placed in his right hand, a little edition of Horace in his left, and the great eighteenth-century classical philologist Richard Bentley's 1732 edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost* under his feet. It is difficult to extract a historically specific attitude toward death from all this. It is, however, easy to see a highly wrought commitment to a deep tradition of classical scholarship that the dead man hoped to reaffirm as he was put into the ground. Underwood's burial, still noticed in the late nineteenth century, suggests how the body in the coffin can appropriate the weight of many millennia. If not exactly timeless—without history—it rests in the very slow time of fixed structures and enduring cultural landscapes. The three chapters in this part are about the underlying cultural resources that give this little story and the whole grand work of the dead its power and efficacy.

Chapter 1

**DO THE DEAD MATTER?**

He looked down intently into a stone crypt. Some animal. Wait. There he goes.

An obese grey rat toddled along the side of the crypt, moving the pebbles. An old stager: great-grandfather: he knows the ropes. The grey alive crushed itself in under the plinth, wriggled itself in under it. Good hiding place for treasure.

Who lives there? Are laid the remains of Robert Emery. Robert Emmet was buried here by torchlight, wasn't he? Making his rounds.

Tail gone now.

One of those chaps would make short work of a fellow. Pick the bones clean no matter who it was. Ordinary meat for them. A corpse is meat gone bad.

*James Joyce, Ulysses*

Diogenes the Cynic, the dog philosopher, had an answer to this chapter’s question: No, the dead do not matter. There is nothing behind the veil of the corpse but rotting organic matter. It is the answer that reason, speaking for nature, gives to culture, demanding that culture explain itself. If Diogenes had not existed, we would have had to invent him; we need a spokesman for what we believe but find unacceptable: the rupture wrought by death on the body. We need someone to insist that the dead do not matter so that we can respond with reasons for why they do. Some two or three centuries after Cicero’s account of Diogenes’ views (see the introduction’s epigraph), the Cynic’s first biographer tells an even more aggressively defiant story about him: “Some say that when dying he left instructions that they should throw him out unburied, that every wild beast might feed on him, or thrust him into a ditch and sprinkle a little dust over him. But according to others, his instructions were that they should throw him into the Ilissus, in order that he might be useful to his brethren.” No one in the Western tradition makes the case against the pretensions of the dead body more uncompromisingly and with such enduring influence: a well-reported and seemingly commonsense rejection of all that decency and custom prescribe. Pierre Bayle, the first great Enlightenment historian of philosophy and a religious skeptic, gets at the qualities that make him such a worthy opponent: he was, Bayle writes, “one of those extraordinary men who are upon
extremes in everything, without excepting reason [without excepting the dead, I will add], and who verify the maxim that there is no great wit without a mixture of folly." Diogenes became the great spokesman for the dead body as fundamentally profane, unenchanted, a part of nature, mere matter, carrion (fig. ii). His younger contemporary Plato, described him as "a Socrates gone mad." He pushed the philosophical pursuit of virtue off the rails; his views on the dead, as on other matters, were crazy. Diogenes is said to have masturbated in public because he thought finding sexual satisfaction was no more embarrassing or private than satisfying one's hunger by having a meal in the agora. He lived on the street, in a barrel, and once told Alexander the Great, who admired him and wanted to do him a good deed, that the only favor he wanted was that Alexander "cease to shade [him] from the sun." He got in trouble for forgery. The philosopher Peter Sloterdijk gets him right: "a man who smells the swindle of idealistic abstractions and the schizoid staleness of thinking limited to the head"; a clown—perhaps the most famous derelict in history—who tested the limits of culture and convention and tried to act on the fact that to be dead is to be nothing (plate 3).

Socrates almost went that far. Just before he takes the poison, he tries to make his student Crito understand that he would not be "laying out, or carrying out, or burying Socrates," because Socrates would no longer be there. He cared little how he would be buried; bury me, he said, "in any way you like if you can catch me and I do not escape you." There would be no Socrates still around to bury. But the live Socrates did not ask his students to reject all that was customary. Diogenes the Cynic did. The differences between them were not metaphysical. Diogenes was not a materialist who believed that death left nothing of a person behind; like the others known as Cynics, and like Socrates, he believed in an immaterial and immortal soul. His views about what to do with the dead body had nothing to do with his views on an afterlife and everything to do with what he thought it meant to live this life virtuously. The virtuous man, he taught, ought to comport himself as closely as possible to nature, that is, to live as one who, like a dog, would do in public what others would do only in private: defecate, fornicate, and masturbate as the natural urges made themselves felt. All decency and civility worked against this sort of austerity and commitment to principle; Socrates followed convention. Diogenes did not, and the dead body had no excuse for not doing likewise. Like a dog, it could subsist virtuously (that is, according to nature) more easily than when it was alive. We humans could and should, as the saying goes, "be buried like dogs," that is, not be buried at all, assuming, of course, that dogs are buried like dogs. In fact, almost everywhere since as far back as we can go, dogs have often not been buried like dogs but in some intimate relation with humans. These dogs—those buried like humans—insist through their dead bodies that they are not part of the natural world but of the world of culture. But that is another, if related, story.

For more than two thousand years, skeptics, speaking in the name of Diogenes, have mocked the social pretensions of doing things for the dead, and especially the folly of funerary practices and monuments. They have spoken for the rupture at death between nature and culture. One story from the first century B.C.E. is an embellishment of the one we have already heard. "If then you die, who will bury you?" the dog philosopher was asked. "Whoever wants my house," he replied. This was the Greek equivalent of "Who cares?" He was famously a street person who took shelter in a large wine cask. Where to be buried and how, he thought, were equally inconsequential. Diogenes inspired stories as few other philosophers of antiquity did. In fact, everything we might claim to know about him is from the mouths of others. A disciple supposedly asks him how to die. "Live according to virtue and nature, and that is in our power." Remember that just as one comes from nature at birth, so one will return to nature when dead; nature begets and destroys. And finally, he jokes about his dead body in such a way as to make fun of the truth that it is already back in nature: "I have no worry about my being at any time unconscious of feeling," because I am sure that "I shall be furnished with a staff after breathing my last, that I might drive away the animals that would defile me."
From this follows a long tradition, running from antiquity to Charles Dickens in the nineteenth century to Jessica Mitford in the twentieth, that much or all care for the dead is folly. In one of Lucian’s (ca. 125–180 C.E.) Dialogues of the Dead, for example, we find Diogenes and King Mausolus of Caria (d. 353 B.C.E.), the eponymous inhabitant of the first “mausoleum,” meeting as corpses in the nether world (fig. 1.2). The philosopher starts the conversation by asking the king whether he thinks he is better off than the rest of the dead because his wife was so fulsome in her grief—she is said to have made herself “a living and breathing tomb” by drinking his ashes mixed in a potion—and because she had built “the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus” for him. Near present-day Bodrum on the Aegean coast of Turkey, it was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Mausolus answers by recounting his deeds and by bragging about his tomb, made of the fairest marble with bas-relief ornaments that were “horses and men reproduced most perfectly.” If all this does not prove his superiority, what does? he asks. “But, my handsome Mausolus,” Diogenes replies, “the strength and the beauty you mention aren’t still with you here.” Your skull is no better than mine; we are both bald and fleshless; our teeth show; our eyes are gone; our noses snubbed. In fact, he continues, having a big tomb does not make Mausolus better than any of the other corpses except perhaps, as he says to the crestfallen king, because you can “claim to carry more weight than the rest of us with all that marble on top of you.” “Will Mausolus and Diogenes be on an equal footing?” Mausolus asks, trying to make the best of it. No, not even that, Diogenes replies. He himself “has no idea whether he even has a tomb for his body, for he didn’t care about all that,” but if he does not have one, then all the better, because being remembered “as one who lived the life of a man . . . towers above your memorial, and is built on surer foundations.” Three long-lived tropes emerge here: first, the futility of marking a particular body with a monument; second, mockery of the illusion that the dead persist in matter, that ashes are a person, and that eating them is a way of somehow re-embodying the dead; and finally, the trope of the equality of the dead.

Some version of the conversation about the futility of taking care of particular bodies when the dead are all basically the same, and all equally irrelevant, became an enormously generative trope. Today it may be best known from the most famous seventeenth-century example: the grave scene (5:1) from Hamlet.

**Hamlet:** Doest thou think Alexander looked o’ this fashion i’ the earth?

**Horatio:** E’en so.

**Hamlet:** And smelt so? Pah!

**Horatio:** E’en so my lord.

**Hamlet:** To what base uses may we return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander, till he find it stopping a bung hole?

**Horatio:** ‘Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.

**Hamlet:** No faith, not a jot. But to follow him thither with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it: as thus: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returnest into dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer barrel.

The great king is of the same stuff—dust, clay—that might be mixed into loam to make a plug for a bunghole. Diogenes is not mentioned explicitly, and Shakespeare could have taken the idea that informs this discussion from elsewhere. But the Cynic is only a step away, if that. The emperor-philosopher Marcus Aurelius, who, like other Stoics, much admired the Cynics, reports that “Alexander of Macedon and his groom are equals now in death.” Both are now no more than dust, he says, in a comment that is near the start of a long tradition of seeing the dead Alexander as the limit case for the nothingness of bones. Diogenes has been often and continuously linked to Alexander since antiquity.
Less than a century after\textit{ Hamlet}, an anonymous storyteller makes the same connection between Diogenes and Alexander, on the one hand, and the undifferentiated materiality of the dead, on the other. This time, the king and the philosopher meet not in the sun but in a charnel house. Alexander asks Diogenes what he is doing there. “I am seeking your father’s bones and those of my slave,” the philosopher replies, but he is unsuccessful “because there is no difference between them.” This story has no ancient source—the Greeks, unlike the Christians, had no charnel houses; Diogenes did not have a slave, although he was said to have been one for a time. It seems to have been invented as a parable for radical Protestants to use to criticize Catholics for their veneration of relics and more moderate Protestants for their superstitious persistence in burying the dead inside churches as if place mattered. By the nineteenth century, Diogenes’ reply had become commonplace in dictionaries of quotations and source books for preachers. If the dead are indistinguishable from one another and from the dust from which they came, they really don’t matter. He gives voice to the view that there is no reason to venerate one corpse over any other. If corpses matter at all, they all matter the same—which is to say, not very much.

In the long history of repeating one version or another of Diogenes’ challenge, the answer has almost always been “yes, you are right, the corpse is nothing”: “all flesh is grass and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field” (Isa 40:6, 1 Pet 1:24); dust to dust; let the body go. But at the same time, no one has been able to live with the consequences of this view. For thousands of years, Diogenes’ sophism or its equivalent has earned assent and at the same time been rejected in a great variety of forms and in response to a wide range of needs, interests, and beliefs. In this dialogue, culture always has an answer to nature and to the philosopher who says we should live and die naturally, as dogs do.

One of the most important and influential these is St. Augustine’s, from the fourth century C.E. He seems to take the Cynic’s side when he asks, “Whether the location of [a] body is of any advantage to the soul of the dead?” It demands careful study, he says, “We should especially inquire, not according to common belief, but according to the sacred writings of our religion, if it has any effect on the souls of men for enduring or for increasing their misery after this life, whether their bodies have not been buried.” If pagan philosophers—Diogenes or those influenced by him—could be indifferent to what happened to their dead, Christians should, all the more, not be ashamed to have their martyred dead left unburied: “Earth has not covered many of the bodies of the Christians, but nothing has kept any one of them from heaven and earth.” Having a proper grave does not matter. The faithful should not believe the “fabulous poetic imaginings” of pagans about the fate of the unburied or unsecured for dead. Augustine is thinking here of a story from Virgil’s\textit{ Aeneid} (6348–394) that would have been known to every educated reader. The poet tells of the “horrendous banks” of the River Styx, where “huge thron of the dead” wait: “mothers and grown men and ghosts of great souled heroes, their bodies stripped of life, and boys and unwed girls,” a helpless “great rout.” The ferryman Charon will not take them across “the hoarse, roaring flood,” “until their bones are buried and they rest in peace.” Augustine explains that this is all a silly fable: the fate of the soul is independent of the fate of the body.

This is the great Church Father speaking in his soteriological voice. But he is not willing to go all the way with Diogenes in rejecting what he takes to be a fundamental human impulse: the care of the dead body. “The bodies of the dead, and especially of the just and faithful, are not to be despised or cast aside. The soul has used them as organs and vessels for all good work in a holy manner. . . . Bodies are not for ornament or for aid, as something that is applied externally, but pertain to the very nature of the man.” Caring for them is therefore a sign of piety, of love, of affection, and of religious devotion. It is a “comfort for the living.” It is a mark of civility and decency: exactly what Diogenes rejected. But more important, it is about linking the common dead to the divine through the bodies of blessed martyrs—the special dead—around whom they are buried. Place and proximity matter after all. Augustine recalls how, before he became a Christian, he witnessed the miraculous restoration of sight to a blind man as an immense crowd gathered for the translation of the long-lost bones of the martyrs Prota and Gervasius into Milan’s cathedral. It would come to matter a great deal where Christians were buried; in fact, for more than a thousand years to be buried anywhere but in proximity to the body of a saint or some other relic was to be “buried like a dog.” Necro-sociability would become the heart of Augustine’s Church. Some bodies did matter, and it was important to believers that they be buried near them rather than be thrown over the wall (fig. 13).

Almost everyone who wrote seriously about death was in conversation with Diogenes. Erasmus (1466–1536), the greatest of the Christian humanists, attributed to Diogenes the views of Epicurus, the materialist philosopher, on why being dead should be a matter of no concern. Sir Thomas Browne (1605–1682), the pious seventeenth-century physician and essayist, seems at first—like St. Augustine, but from a Protestant perspective—to agree with Diogenes. Having dissected many dead bodies, he knows from experience that they are nothing but rot and decay. And because he knows this so well, he does not, he says, care what happens to his own body. Like Diogenes, he is willing to bid "toll adieu of the world, not caring for a Monument, History, or Epitaph, not so much as the bare memory of my name to be found any where but in the universal Register of God." What is the point? "Grave-stones tell truth scarce forty years"; the names of the great concourse of the dead, in number far greater than the names of the living, are almost all lost. From the perspective of deep time it does not matter what one does with the dead: "who can but pity the founder of the pyramids?"

But perhaps it does matter. Browne has an almost idolatrous relationship to dead bodies that Diogenes would have laughed at. He recounts sympathetically how Achilles and Patroclus, and again Domitian and his mistress (and niece) Julia, "affectionately compounded their bones, passionately endeavoring to continue their living union." Even in his day, he could have given scores more examples like these; from our perspective there are thousands. And Browne also had second thoughts about himself: "I am not so Cynical, as to approve the Testament of Diogenes." In his "calmer judgment," that is, when he listens to the still voices of the heart rather than the more shrill dictates of reason, he too wants to be buried so as to remain part of an imagined community of the living like the patriarchs, he wants to "sleep by the urns of their Fathers and go the nearest way into corruption." Browne was buried beneath a rather fine monument under the chancel of St. Peter Mancroft, Norwich.

More than a century and a half after Browne, the poet William Wordsworth has still another conversation with Diogenes. He refers to "varlet [knavish] Philosophers, as Diogenes, who desired to be devoured of fishes." Perhaps he was thinking here of Herodotus's claim that strange, uncivilized tribes throw their dead into the sea, since Diogenes wanted to be left for the beasts. But his real target is the view that the dead body does not matter. It does, he says, because, like "the shell of the flown bird," it was once united with a soul, an intimate association that makes the corpse matter and explains why we give the dead a proper grave: "a tribute to man as a human being." And conversely, if we really did believe that the body is just a shell, of no more importance to the human than the shells of the fowls of the forest or the chickens in the roost are to them, then we would not write epitaphs near bodies to keep the departed in memory. But we do, and since the beginning of literacy, always have. Historical anthropology—culture—Wordsworth suggests, proves Diogenes' naturalism wrong.

But it doesn't. The metaphor of the flight of the bird representing the soul leaving the body was used as a common motif on New England Puritan grave-stones to make precisely the opposite point. When the shell of a hatching egg breaks, "the bird does then fly away," says Cotton Mather. Likewise "our death is the breaking of the shell [i.e., the body] and we have an Immortal Soul in us, which is We, and in this we Fly away." The body that remains is not "we." Radical Puritans took this to be an argument for giving as little attention to the dead body as possible. But their views did not carry the day. For all of their condemnation of idolatry, thousands of Puritan bodies are buried on an east-west axis awaiting resurrection, under poignantly carved gravestones in scores of New England cemeteries.

There have thus been many reasons for answering Diogenes with "yes, but..." They depend not on any particular view of the soul, or its claim on the body, or even on the existence of an immortal or immaterial soul. In the ellipses "..." is the work of the dead, of the human imagination, and of this book. That work is possible only because we as a species have consistently resisted Diogenes. Or rather, we have created him in order to explain to ourselves why a corpse remains within culture, bears the mark of life, and cannot be thrown away as carrion. His answer to the question of this chapter—the dead do not matter—has had little purchase for all the many times it has been repeated. But if the answer isn't no, then why not?

The story from Augustine's Confessions has already hinted at one reason that has had wide resonance over many millennia and religious traditions. There is one class of the dead whose bodies are the locus of the sacred, of the divine on earth, even though their remains look like any other. (Sometimes their bodies are different—the incorruptible dead—but those of most of the early martyrs at issue for Augustine were badly mauled by beasts, fire, and other tortures.) This type of special dead survives into the present. But by the late eighteenth century, a new kind had emerged: special not because of the presence of the divine or because we subscribe to a theology favorable to them but because historical anthropology, independent of theology or ideology, implicitly underwrites the aura of bones and because nations and social movements and families and associations of all sorts need then. Whatever our religious beliefs, or lack of belief, we share the very deep human desire to live with our ancestors and with their bodies. We mobilize their power. And even as we align ourselves with skeptical Cynic tradition—all dead bodies are alike and useless—and deny that the holy exists anywhere in our world, especially in a dead body, we still want our special bodies, our special dead.

A specific body. It would be a national scandal if the body of Rousseau or Zola
in the Pantheon actually turned out to belong to someone else, or if some other body—especially a body with a name—were substituted for the Unknown Warrior’s in Westminster Abbey. And by extension, the remains of the ordinary dead come to matter; people are upset if a funeral director mixes up one urn of chemically identical ashes with another; this book is full of other examples. The charisma—the divinely given grace—of the special dead is infectious and ubiquitous. Sir James Frazer, one of the nineteenth-century founders of anthropology, gets it wrong; not just among “primitive” people and Catholics, but other people as well, the belief persists that the dead “affect the lives of survivors for good or ill.”

One of the great pre-Nicene Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria (150–ca. 215 C.E.), diagnosed brilliantly the nature of our enduring belief that some of the dead can do great things. He, unlike Protestants who more than a thousand years later who followed his lead, writes not against his fellow Christians—there were very few martyrs at the time he was writing and few signs of the cult of the saints that would flourish exuberantly after the fourth century—but against pagans for making so much of their special dead. These he said, are nothing but idols; they are false gods.

These temples [of daemon worship] . . . are called by a fair sounding name, but in reality they are tombs. But I appeal to you, even at this late hour, forget daemon-worship, feeling ashamed to honor tombs. In the temple of Athena in the Acropolis at Larissa there is the tomb of Acrisius; and in the Acropolis at Athens the tomb of Cecrops. And what of Erichthonius? . . . But really, if I were to go through all the tombs held sacred in your eyes, “The whole of time would not suffice my need.” As for you, unless a touch of shame steals over you for these audacities, then you are going about utterly dead, like the dead in whom you put your trust.

Clement is on to something important in our own day as well as his: the almost irresistible, primal idolatry of the dead body and the near certainty in some circumstances that it—or in any case, some dead bodies—will become “sacred in [our] eyes.” This sacrality attaches itself to a corpse as easily as, or perhaps more easily than, to living flesh and blood. Diogenes, he seemed to realize, would never be dangerous. In fact, the threat came from the opposite direction.

There is an ample empirical record that Clement was right about pagans. The Iron Age, Bronze Age, and classical Greece were, in fact, rich in the tombs of heroes and of the progenitors of cities and demes where sacrifices and prayers were offered to daemons. Clement may have been exaggerating a little; from the perspective of modern historians, daemons are not quite immortal gods, even if they are more than men, and their tombs were not exactly temples. But they were votive sites; they had altars; people prayed there; the dead that they purportedly sheltered channeled some measure of the divine. He thinks that the distinction modern scholars might make between “tomb” and “temple” (between the profane and the sacred dead) is irrelevant. “It seems to me,” he writes, “that tombs are objects of reverence in just the same way temples are; in fact, pyramids, mausoleums and labyrinths are as it were temples of dead men, just as temples are the tombs of gods.” The gods in temples are as dead as the dead in tombs. It makes no difference to Clement whether the tomb is that of Antinous, the emperor Hadrian’s favorite, whom he made into a divinity, or a cultic tomb that “Zeus [had] consecrated [for] Ganymedes.” To entreat the help of the dead—any of the dead—is idolatry because, he insists, they are false gods, fictitious divinities that are “nothing in the world,” as St. Paul put it (1 Cor 8:4). The Christian God, by contrast, lives.

The idolatry of the dead that Clement diagnoses reaches well beyond the pagans whom he criticizes. Buddhists are not the “bourgeois rationalists” that we have believed them to be; in both popular and elite Buddhist practice, the “utterly profane and loathsome—the corporeal remains of the dead” (that is, of the special dead)—are the physical locus of holiness. Not icons or signs, the bits of bone and desiccated flesh that remain from the funeral pyre or mumification are “the distilled essence of human corporeality.” The merest matter from a corpse of the special dead brings the holy to earth. Similarly, the Jews had their cult of holy tombs and it too seemed idolatrous to its critics. “How can I be silent while certain idolatrous practices are rampant among Israel?” came a complaint from tenth-century Jerusalem. People “pass the night among tombstones. They make requests of the dead. They light candles upon the graves of righteous ones.” With variations, the same thing happened in Islam despite the prophet’s manifest hostility to the cult of the dead.

Within two centuries after Clement wrote, Christians would make temples of their tombs by the hundreds and soon by the thousands. They would have to defend themselves against pagans, and later fellow Christians, who made precisely the arguments that Clement had made. The special dead—the saints and martyrs who created the necrogeography of the ascendant new religion—were, as Peter Brown writes, “exempt from the facts of death.” Early Christians could imagine the blood flowing back into here-and-now bones, rejoined with flesh, at the resurrection of the special dead. At their graves “the eternity of paradise and the first touch of the resurrection come into the present.” Even a part of the body of a saint who died the horribly painful death of martyrdom becomes detached from its physical presence and is transformed into a sign of the great promise of Christianity: the corporeal resurrection of the dead, the divine, miraculous reversal in death of the laws of entropy. The bodies of saints, especially the early
martyrs torn to pieces by beasts, were often less than nothing in their physicality, though some later saints purportedly smelled sweet or were otherwise distinguishable from ordinary bodies. But they were the remains of the house that had sheltered a soul that was now in a privileged place with God; they were a new kind of link between heaven and earth. They were, so to speak, the outward sign of a great and powerful friend who was able to intercede for the more spiritually needy. The relics of saints thus represent the limit case of the responses to Diogenes—because in their case the "nothing" of corporeality had become a magnificent something, a matrix linking heaven and earth.8

But this was no easy linkage. It raised for a thousand years the danger that Clement, and others as well, identified—idolatry. Nothing has been fraught with more controversy than the cultural transmutation of profane corporeal remains into vessels of holiness. Enormous intellectual energy went into the creation of an orthodox Christian theology in which the veneration of the special dead was central, in which proximity to these dead was advantageous to the living and ultimately to their souls. It was at the heart of the pre-Reformation Church at all levels and in a spectacular variety of ways. Immense pastoral effort went into the day-to-day problems of policing the holy. The miracles that were the main evidence for a relic's authenticity had to be confirmed. Special bones had to be distinguished from fake ones—the movement of relics and the documentation of their provenance had to be regulated. They were, after all, just bones or some other material that had been elevated into treasures because they were evidence for the existence, and the intercessory power, of a saintly life. Like paper money and credit, their power was derived from a promise of something—a status claim—and not from the material itself; they could do their work only in the context of belief in a larger world of meaning of which they were a part. Thus pastoral authorities could destroy the credit of particular relics and popular demand could restore it in turn. Making so much of the corporeal remains of saints acknowledged once again the answer to Diogenes' truth by pointing to the enormous amount of cultural work—work of the imagination—that needs to go into giving the dead body meaning. The possibility of a fake aura must not be allowed to discredit real aura and therefore has to be recognized in order to be repressed.19

A healthy skepticism was important, not about whether there could be such a thing as a relic, but about the authenticity of many particular cases. Under all but the best of circumstances, special bones look just like other bones; they usually did not speak for themselves and thus out of the context of a reliquary and the community that venerated them, confirmation could pose an insurmountable problem. Fakes were rife. Many experts, had they wanted to, could no doubt have caught out amateur tricksters like Chaucer's pardoner, but the problem was more difficult in the context of the huge and profitable market in stolen relics whose provenance, like that of stolen art today, had been purposely obscured. How was the famous Bishop Odo of Bayeaux (1036–1097) to be certain that the bones he had purchased with the understanding that they belonged to St. Exuperius (a shadowy fifth-century bishop of Toulouse) were not actually those of a peasant of the same name foisted on him by a church custodian? How were the claims of different churches in different places to have the bones of the same saint to be adjudicated? Caveat emptor. Within the world of medieval Catholicism, in which the veneration of relics was an important part of religious practice, there were grounds for doubt in any particular case, grounds for wondering whether these specific bones were really something special, or just bones. But the theological principle of the special dead—of a divine aura in corporeal remains—and the imperative to venerate their bodies were not in doubt. This theological and pastoral activity kept Diogenes' challenge alive; the two were interdependent in their dialectical dance between nothingness and sacrality.

One might think that the Reformation, with its assault on idolatry, would be a turning point in this history. And in some ways it was. It is true that the whole world of the special dead, not just the abuses committed in their name, came fundamentally into question. It was a central tenant of the Reformers that a Christian did not need the help of saints or other intermediaries for salvation: sola scriptura, sola fides, sola gratia, and solus Christus. In the realm of theology and approved practice, bones and anything else belonging to them were irrelevant to human faith and redemption. To the more radical and Calvinist Reformers and to the iconoclasts on the streets who destroyed shrines and scattered bones throughout northern Europe, the veneration of saints' relics was an especially offensive species of idolatry. "Error and deception" were banished from Geneva when the putative arm of St. Anthony was exposed as the male member of a stag and then mocked in parade through the city, a sort of carnivalesque procession that turned the meaning and value of a treasured relic upside down in a public ritual of desacralization. The profanity of corporeal veneration was everywhere exposed. The brain of St. Peter was revealed to be a mere pumice stone; the voices of saints heard coming from bodies in the Church of St. Gervais were discovered to be the sound of wind blowing through "pots and pipes." Even the genuine bones and bodies of the special dead were just bones. The dead are just the dead. "Bones are bones, and not gods," as Martin Bucer (1491–1551), the Protestant leader in Strasbourg, put it.20 According to the Protestant story, Rome turned its back on this truth. The Reformers echoed Clement: "I appeal to you, even at this late hour, forget daemon-worship, feeling ashamed to honor tombs." In the wake of the Reformation, Clement's sensibility would find new voice in a shifted theological register. The eighteenth-century Protestant historian Joseph Bingham, for example, cited the ancient Church Father as his authority for the
pagan practice of crowning the dead with garlands, which he took as evidence that the pagans' "idol Gods were only Men." By contrast, early Christians, he reported, did not crown their dead, "expecting a crown of everlasting Flowers from God." Reformers claimed to be returning to the practices of the primitive Church and assiduously rejecting the idolatrous practices of papal Catholicism. Making daemons of the dead and worshipping them as if they had power were not, by Bingham's lights, fundamentally Christian practices, but rather had crept into the true Church since its early days and perverted it with remnants of popular paganism. "Why might no one know where Moses' Sepulcher was?" asked a radical Puritan in 1642. The answer, he explained, was "for fear of idolatrous worship": "had the people known the place they would have worshiped the mould there, and kissed his bones." 31 In Protestantism, bones (and corporeal remains more generally) came to be viewed as organic iterations of dangerous images and monuments rather than the reverse. That is, they were an incitement to idolatry.

Neither this doctrinal discussion nor the widespread acts of iconoclasm that accompanied the spread of reformed Christianity spelled an end to the Christian (or, for that matter, other Western) veneration of the dead. Catholics embraced bones as never before, and even among Protestants, the dead lived on without the old soteriology. Dead bodies did not lose their aura even if they lost their institutional and theological support. Anti-relic relics are commonplace once we start to notice them. Those of Rev. George Whitefield (1714–1770) are exceptional because of their sheer incongruity. The most famous evangelical preacher in eighteenth-century America and one of the major Methodist clergymen of the North Atlantic world—an unlikely saint if ever there was one—was buried in a glass-topped coffin under the pulpit of the Old South Presbyterian Church in Newburyport, Massachusetts, after a lively and far-flung competition for his body. In 1775, Revolutionary War soldiers prevailed on the sexton to let them enter the crypt, open the coffin, and cut off pieces of his collar and waistband, which they divided among themselves as talismans to help in the arduous battles that awaited them. Like the body of a medieval saint, Whitefield's did not suffer the fate of ordinary corpses. In 1784, a visiting Englishman went down into the crypt to test the rumor that the evangelist's body was "entire and uncorrupted"; it was true. The body was still perfect in 1790, according to another visitor. By 1801 the flesh was gone, but Whitefield's gown, cassock, and bands remained in good shape. He had little rest: his skull was removed, taken to Boston to be cast, and safely returned; his arm was stolen in the late 1820s, probably by an Englishman from Bolton, and was reunited with its kindred remains in the vault only after a "no questions asked" appeal in 1849 for the return of "the venerable relic." In the thirty years after the Civil War, some six thousand people signed the visitors' book in Old South Church after visiting the crypt. Not until 1933 was Whitefield finally covered up and left in peace. The status of the special dead persisted in both popular and elite circles well after the bona fides they had acquired in the early Church were gone. Clement had a point. 32

The case of the English Enlightenment, deist philosopher and radical William Godwin makes Clement's point again, more powerfully and in a thoroughly modern register. Godwin believed in the truth of Diogenes; that is, he believed that the dead were insensate and did not possess an immortal soul. They were gone; they were no more. But in his Essay on Sepulchres (1809), which is about secular necromancy, Godwin succumbs to the idolatry of which Clement warned: that is, the dead whom he proposed to honor were "utterly dead," like those in the tomb temples of the pagans. He believed nothing of what St. Augustine and St. Thomas believed, but he writes in terms they would have recognized; he cherished the last few molecules of the beloved dead as if they were alive and urged his countrymen to honor the burial places of the illustrative dead more generally.

An exemplar of post–French revolutionary Romantic sensibility, Godwin's Essay is, as its subtitle makes explicit, A Proposal for Erecting Some Memorial of the Illustrious Dead in All Ages on the Spot Where Their Remains Have Been Interred, and it was intended to be the first step of a utopian plan to map necrogeography in such a way as to resist the inevitable erosion by time. Palpably responding to the sense of cataclysmic temporal rupture experienced by the postrevolutionary generation, he sought some means to preserve memory from the ravages of change and to build on the dead the foundation of a national community rooted in deep time. He, more than almost anyone else I discuss in this book, was caught between what he believed—the infinite improbability of mankind—and what he knew in his heart: the sheer intractable fact of death. Thomas Malthus had made fun of Godwin for his claim that the human sexual impulse could be tamed, for his optimism in believing that sexual desire, overwhelmingly compelling by nature, could be made to retreat by the forces of culture. Godwin harbored no such illusions in the face of death, but still he struggled to keep the dead among the living.

His proposal seems entirely plausible by our standards: that the places where noteworthy bodies are buried should be identified by name—like today's historical signs—and should be marked on maps, like those that already existed "in which the scenes of famous battles were distinguished with a particular mark." This exercise would result in what he called an "Atlas of those who Have Lived, for the Use of Men Hereafter to be Born," and by these means it would be possible to keep in memory those who might otherwise be forgotten. He knew, anecdotally and intuitively, what modern research has confirmed: that after the passing of the generations that had known the dead directly, or through the stories of those who had, the interest of the living in those who are gone fades; gravestones become neglected and fall into ruin, they are cut down as stubble in the field. The
..."perishableness of monuments" and the shortness of memory were all too clear, the Romantic variation on *Sic transit Gloria mundi.* "Where is Horace’s tomb now? Or where the tomb of Macenas his patron?" he asks rhetorically. His son-in-law, Percy Bysshe Shelley, would make the same point in "Ozymandias" about the broken statue of the once-great king:

Round the decay of that colossal wreck boundless and bare
The lone level sands stretch far away.

Godwin offers his proposal as a way to avert oblivion through perpetual care of names and bodies for the sake of mankind. The "recollection and admiration of the dead" made possible by knowing where they are buried, he argues, make us better people and the world a more virtuous place. The civilizational claim in behalf of memory (to which I will return in chapter 3) is less important here than the arguments he makes for why dead bodies in their crude materiality are near the heart of memory. Godwin wrote this pamphlet twelve years after his wife, the writer and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, died while giving birth to the girl who would end up marrying the poet Shelley and writing *Frankenstein.* Godwin and Wollstonecraft’s courtship and marriage had been short but intensely passionate. Her death had devastated him. Six months after she died, he published his revealing (by many contemporary accounts, too revealing) *Memoir* of her life, but it did not mark the end of his mourning. The enormity of death—"the greatest of earthly calamities, and the most universal"—still weighed on his heart twelve years later. "The dead are gone," he reflects, "beyond all the powers of calculation to reach", "the effects flowing from the mortality of man to human affairs" is incalculable. Loss is "perhaps greater to him that survives than to him that dies," not because, as St. Augustine wrote, the dead are cold comfort, and the deist Godwin was famously not given to faith. He is, Godwin, like Augustine in this respect, tries to bridge the unimaginably great divide between the world of the living and the world of the dead through attention to certain special dead: not saints, not those in whose bones the holy resides, but "those who Have Lived, for the Use of Men." The question is why someone who was as close to an atheist as we will find in the late eighteenth century thought that the special dead were able to do what he was asking of them. Godwin’s answer takes us eerily back to the Church Fathers. He offers a psychological and anthropological theory that goes back via St. Thomas to the beginnings of the Church. For

those who survive, he says, anything associated with a friend—their possessions, the furniture they used—has "the virtue which the Indian is said to attribute to the spoils of him he kills." This in itself is a remarkable emotional alliance with superstition for a man who prided himself on his civilized rationalism. Everything, he continues, "which has been practically associated with my friend, acquires a value from that consideration; his ring, his watch, his books, his habitations." (The "he" in this case is a "she"; the friend in question is "the wife of my bosom.") But a far more powerful connection to the person of the friend than what she had owned or had held near to her body was her body itself. Godwin knows he ought to accept the views of the idealist philosopher Bishop Berkeley that "the body of my friend, the vehicle through which [her] knowledge and virtue was conveyed to me, was nothing." And yet he admits he is unable to let it go at that: "I can never separate my idea of [her] peculiarities and [her] actions, from my idea of [her] person." "I cannot," he concludes, "love my friend, without loving [her] person," and if the cold, unfeeling, inert relics of a friend are the nearest thing to that person one has to love and cherish on this side of the great divide, so be it: "[Her] dead body is far closer to that person even than [her] book or watch.

Godwin is painfully aware that there exists no more radical rupture than that between the living and the dead body; if its rosy hue could somehow be purchased it "would be my companion still," which it—she—painfully is not. The corpse is the great, paradigmatic reminder provided for us by the "system of the universe" that we are of a degraded nature and of humble origins, that we are mortal. We cast bodies into the ground to mold back into earth as a token of this truth. And yet, strangely, the corpse still remains the person it was, lacking only what seems so little yet so immeasurably great—the breath of life, the "rosy hue." He wants to insist that the corpse and the person are not irrevocably sundered, that there is another reality, one grounded in the emotions, that can challenge the self-evident, acknowledged reality that the dead are really gone; they are no more in this world. His unwillingness to let them go raises the next obvious, and universal, question: if the dead are not gone, then where are they? "Where is my friend?" he asks. "Close deductions of reasoning" might allow him, he says, to recover "the thinking principle which animated [her]." "Suggestions of faith" might allow him to follow the dead "through the vast regions of space and see the spirit return to God that gave it." But neither of these options is satisfying. Recollections of the wise things a person said or wrote—the remains of "the thinking principle)—are cold comfort, and the deist Godwin was famously not given to faith. He is, he insists, a "creature of sense," a creature of things that are palpable, present, touchable. The dead matter. This fact, in turn, suggests both a dispiriting conclusion—a moldering body is very far from a passionate friend and wife—and the beginning of hope. All that we have left is the epitaph *his jacet,* "here lies, dead,"

Do the Dead Matter? • 51
over the place where “the body is deposited.” *Hic locus est* in the old sense will not work. The holy is nowhere. There is only the name and the dead body beneath it. Or, to be more precise, the sign with the name points indexically to a specific body and somehow, in or through it, to a person who is no more.

As a last resort, Godwin appropriates the remarkable power of the imagination and creates a microcosm of the kinds of stories this book tells. One would have to have an impenetrable heart, he says, not to feel “a certain sacredness of the grave,” a sensibility as old as writing on the subject of death, and as generative. Based on this intuition—this feeling—Godwin proposes a kind of necromancy: “the habit of seeing with the intellectual eyes things not visible to the eye of sense,” “rescuing the illustrious dead from the jaws of the grave,” making “them pass in review,” querying “their spirits and recording their answers,” and having “live intercourse with the illustrious Dead of all ages.” The proposal to erect a small monument, with a name affixed, to the final resting places of the worthy dead—or even the legendary resting places of near-mythical figures like King Arthur or Homer and fictional ones like Clarissa—is thus, explicitly, an act of calling them back or willing them into being through an inner voice and the act of building memorials.

But he wants to do more than just call individuals back to life. Naming the places “hallowed by the reception of all that was mortal of these glorious beings” and erecting a “shrine to the memory” is de facto creating a community of the holy dead without believing in holiness. It is a way of communing with each and every one of them without subscribing to any traditional religious views of how and whether this might be possible. Godwin offers what he knows is a formula for necromancy and for the veneration of relics in which he does not believe and that the national church vigorously disavows. We “indulge all the reality we can now attain, he says, “the craft and mystery by which we may spiritually each in his own way, approach the place where he was, and perhaps commune with his person. We are back to the aura of the dead.”

Godwin’s 1833, but we “start calling up the deceased from the silence of the grave and compelling them to disclose the secrets of the world unknown.” The dead are, or ought to be, beyond “our power to disturb” because there is something sacred about their repose. And yet: Godwin is interested not in the “secrets of the grave” but in a conversation about things of this world. But he does want to rescue, query, and pass

the dead in review. He wants the presence of his beloved Mary Wollstonecraft and believes that proximity to her dead body is, sadly, as close as he can get.36

Already in 1809, he was aware that he was sailing close to what generations of English would have branded Catholic superstition, that what he was writing might seem out of character for a man such as himself, who in “his genuine and direct sphere, is the disciple of reason.” Perhaps he protests too much by assuring readers that there is “no danger in the present state temper of the European mind of falling into idolatry.” But still, “no one could not be affected by the visit to a grave”—true, as far as it goes, both for his times and for ours today. If we watch visitors to the chaste grave of Elvis Presley in Graceland’s Meditation Garden, or to the less chaste graves of Victor Noir in Père Lachaise, whose bronze protruding penis has been rubbed shiny by generations of women hoping for a cure to infertility, or of Jim Morrison nearby, clouded in the mists of marijuana smoke, we may wonder if “idolatry” in the present state of the modern mind is really past. At least in these cases it is benign.

Godwin, the Protestant deist, had reason to be defensive. Whether he knew it or not, Aquinas defended “the worship of relics of the saints” in terms that are essentially the same as those Godwin used to explain his attachment to the body of his beloved Wollstonecraft, and, by extension, to others whom one wants to keep near. Quoting St. Augustine as his authority, St. Thomas argued: “If a father’s coat or ring, or anything else of that kind is so much cherished by his children, as the love for one’s parents is greater, in no way are the bodies themselves to be despised, which are more intimately and closely united to us than any garment; for they belong to a man’s very nature.” Someone who loves a person who has departed will have affection for her clothes and — this seems evident to Aquinas—for her body or parts of her body. If this is the case for the ordinary bodies of the ordinary dead, it is all the more true for the special bodies of the special dead—the bodies of saints—which were the temples, and organs of the holy ghost dwelling living and operating in them.” The skeptic might respond with the syllogism that (a) it is absurd to venerate that which is insensible; (b) the bodies of saints [and of everyone else] are insensible; and therefore (c) it is absurd to venerate them. But the answer is clear. One worships not an insensible body for its own sake but for the sake of the soul to which it was once united. That is, the dead body carries with it a quality of having been something material that had an intimate relationship with the soul, just as a beloved father’s ring or clothes had with his person. We are back to the aura of the dead.37

The philosophical and religious justifications as well as the purposes for which they sought to honor the bodies of the dead could not have been more different for Godwin, on the one hand, and for the greatest theologians of the Church, on the other. Godwin thinks that the “recollection and admiration of the dead” that come from knowing where they are buried will make us better people and
the world a more virtuous place. Augustine and Aquinas believe it connects this world with God and the saints in heaven to the benefit of the living and the dead. Godwin denies an afterlife for the dead body; Aquinas believes that the self-same person, body and soul, will be resurrected on the Day of Judgment.

But for all the differences in the two accounts, taken together they show that one can go a long way toward making the dead body consequential without having particular eschatological or metaphysical commitments. It was an Enlightenment radical materialist who believed that the dead "are infected with the perishable quality of their histories," that they were "imbued with some qualifying substance, or active principle." It was the deist Godwin who believed that, unremembered, they are "barren soil," and that they "perished and left not a trace behind." But, properly buried and remembered, those clods of earth ("the dust is earth; of earth we make loam") are "admirably fertile," not of grain or flowers but of "sentiments and virtues." Godwin's proposed landscapes are thus enchanted not by a connection with a heavenly order or by bodies that had once harbored immortal souls but by history and, paradigmatically, by the history to which the dead body testifies. In other words, he tells the story of how the "nothing" of the dead body can become something on account of its having been "something" when it was alive. The corporeal remains of the body and the other objects that the departed has left behind continue to signify, whether one denies the possibility of enchantment, as Godwin does in his more sober moments, or embraces enchantment, as Augustine does.

And the body, by the fact of its physical location, infuses its meaning into the land where it rests and decomposes. The value of the body of one's beloved and of the things that belonged to her are "not merely fictitious," Godwin insists: they are constitutive of a person existing in our individual and, more broadly, our historical consciousness through the ages. The dead, he says, "have an empire" over the mind. They have always mattered, as thousands of years of answers to Diogenes suggest; they matter still in the modern era, when they seem to have little of the old sacrality left. Put differently, the status of the special dead, by whose proximity the ordinary dead profited, has been democratized. In the past two or three centuries, the sacrality that informs the dead has been excavated from the deep structures of the past and from the historical anthropology that informs our constant dialectical conversation with Diogenes.

The dead matter because we cannot bear to give them up, because the ordinary dead partake of the holiness of the special dead and its equivalent in the modern world, and perhaps simply because they have always mattered, for reasons that I will elaborate in the next two chapters.

Chapter 2
THE DEAD BODY AND THE PERSISTENCE OF BEING

Beneath the water people drowned,
Yet with another heaven crowned,
In spacious regions seemed to go
As freely moving to and fro:
In bright and open space
I saw their very face;
Eyes, hands, and feet they had like mine;
Another sun did with them shine.

THOMAS TRAHERNE, "SHADOWS IN THE WATER"

It is wonderful that five thousand years have now elapsed since the creation of the world, and still it is undecided whether or not there has ever been an instance of a spirit of any person appearing after death. All argument is against it; but all belief is for it.

JAMES BOSWELL, The Life of Samuel Johnson

One of the three pillars on which the work of the dead is built, as the last chapter showed, is the enduring human resistance to Diogenes' argument that the materiality of the dead body warrants its being treated like carrion: it matters even if it is just matter, we insist, and hence we care for it. Although religious or other generally metaphysical views may underwrite this resistance to letting it simply be what it is, they are not necessary. An abiding, seemingly universal commitment to live with the dead, identified by historical and philosophically inflected anthropology, provides reason enough. We are speaking, I suggested, of an originary moment of culture. This, I know is something of a tautology: we live with the dead because we, as a species, live with the dead. We can do one
single-shaft grave. No. 3788 in Rusholme, Manchester, was opened on 13 November 1825 for the burial of Dennis Hannam, “found dead on the highway”; thirteen bodies later, on 25 November we come to Maria Bright, forty-five, who died of “decline”; and the infant Elizabeth Gibbons, who died from the same cause, and Anne Findley, twenty-six, who died in childbirth. By 27 November, coffins must have been near the top of the grave, because all but one of the next fifteen occupants were children. Chris Connelly, dead of measles at fourteen months, on 7 December became the top coffin. Less than four weeks after it was opened, grave 3788 was closed. In the Bradford Order Books we do not even get names. First in grave 619 is no. 25439, eight years; then comes 25440, fifty-five years; thirteen bodies later, 25453, four months; near the end we get to 25522, nine hours; and finally 25525, stillborn. This pit yielded £23 7s.6d. for a space that must have been not much larger than a substantial middle-class plot that sold for one-third that amount. In Père Lachaise, a fosse commune—a common grave—held the poor for five years, after which they were disinterred and tossed. The poor responded by making a proper funeral a matter of utmost importance. Even if the body was lost, it needed to be laid in the grave with dignity. This is the subject of the next section. But the point for now is that the erasure of the poor is a consequence not so much of class antagonism directly as of a shift in the work of the dead that the cemetery made possible. The small stage of the churchyard could not accommodate the cosmopolitan dead, the dead of a nation, the working-class dead, the dead of the city and of the middle class, the dead of many religions. Whereas the churchyard gathered its local, hierarchically ordered dead to await a common resurrection, the cemetery was home to civil society a single-shaft grave. No. 3788 in Rusholme, Manchester, was opened on 13 November 1825 for the burial of Dennis Hannam, “found dead on the highway”; thirteen bodies later, on 25 November we come to Maria Bright, forty-five, who died of “decline”; and the infant Elizabeth Gibbons, who died from the same cause, and Anne Findley, twenty-six, who died in childbirth. By 27 November, coffins must have been near the top of the grave, because all but one of the next fifteen occupants were children. Chris Connelly, dead of measles at fourteen months, on 7 December became the top coffin. Less than four weeks after it was opened, grave 3788 was closed. In the Bradford Order Books we do not even get names. First in grave 619 is no. 25439, eight years; then comes 25440, fifty-five years; thirteen bodies later, 25453, four months; near the end we get to 25522, nine hours; and finally 25525, stillborn. This pit yielded £23 7s.6d. for a space that must have been not much larger than a substantial middle-class plot that sold for one-third that amount. In Père Lachaise, a fosse commune—a common grave—held the poor for five years, after which they were disinterred and tossed. The poor responded by making a proper funeral a matter of utmost importance. Even if the body was lost, it needed to be laid in the grave with dignity. This is the subject of the next section. But the point for now is that the erasure of the poor is a consequence not so much of class antagonism directly as of a shift in the work of the dead that the cemetery made possible. The small stage of the churchyard could not accommodate the cosmopolitan dead, the dead of a nation, the working-class dead, the dead of the city and of the middle class, the dead of many religions. Whereas the churchyard gathered its local, hierarchically ordered dead to await a common resurrection, the cemetery was home to civil society, a new kind of space in which new social, political, and cultural ideals could claim their place in history and memory. It was also an arena for class.

**PUTTING THE DEAD IN THEIR PLACE: PAUPER FUNERALS AND PROPER FUNERALS, BURIALS AND REBURIALS**

Oh, Where are the mourners? Alas! He has none; He has left not a gap in the world now he is gone, Not a tear in the eye of child, woman, or man— To the grave with his carcasse as fast as you can. “Rattle his Bones over the stones; He’s only a pauper whom nobody owns!”

**THOMAS NOEL, “THE PAUPER’S DRIVE,” 1839**

This ditty could only have been written in the nineteenth century. Before then, in principle at least, the parish owned its poor and gave them graves in its church-yard. And, again in principle, a decent funeral even for paupers was taken for granted. Guilds and early friendly societies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries helped to ensure that members would be appropriately buried, but in general there was little anxiety about the matter. All this changed in part as a result of the deraciniation that the fall of the old regime brought with it to the world of the dead. On the one hand, there were new horizons: new places allowed for new funeral rituals and monuments of all sorts; they were open to bodies that before had been shunned in the churchyard. The rapid increase of funereal undertaking raised the stakes for what the dead—and the living—might want and expect. On the other hand, the old safety nets disappeared: the erasure of the pauper dead from cemeteries made the body’s last claim on public notice and public space as it moved toward the grave more emotionally exigent, more poignant, more important to the poor and disposed. The possibilities of social death had increased. Finally, the bodies of the poor were ever more vulnerable to the pressures of a modern society: anatomists and artists sought and obtained them in greater numbers; the authorities in charge of the poor were ever more conscious of costs and more concerned with the political economy of poverty than with maintaining old proprieties. In this context, the funeral (proper and pauper) and the antifuneral (dissection and exhumation) became more central to the work of the dead in the modern age. This section explains why this was the case: why and how the pauper funeral became so melancholy; why the proper funeral became so culturally central; and why the dead were on the move to an extent and for a variety of reasons rarely if ever equaled in the West.

The ignominious funerals of the poor became a public and a private scandal in the nineteenth century. Tory radicals like William Cobbett and High Church Anglicans like Augustus Welby Pugin regarded the treatment of the pauper dead as symptomatic of the heartlessness of the industrial order (fig. 5.25). For the poor it was a more intimate danger. “Nothing” tended “to keep up in the imaginations of the poorer sort of people a generous horror of the workhouse more than the manner in which pauper funerals are conducted,” wrote the essayist Charles Lamb in 1811. Almost a century later a working-class mother in London told a social investigator that she would rather have her dead child picked up by a dust-cart than have it carted through the neighborhood by the “Black Maria” of the parish. It was an abiding fear. To be “put away on the parish” was for the survivor’s family to bear a “lifelong stigma,” wrote Robert Roberts in his account of the “classic slum” of his boyhood in the 1910s and 1920s. The pauper funeral was a resonant symbol of profound degradation even to those in no danger of suffering it. The acute sensibilities of the poor to the fate of their bodies loomed large in discussions of medical teaching, burial, and cemetery reform even if only to be disregarded. Of all the horrors that the future Earl of Shaftsbury must have
The desire for a decent funeral, however defined, and for a place in ground where one belonged was not new in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But a widespread sense that what came to be regarded as the bare necessities of civilization might well be denied, that an abyss of ignominy faced the dying poor and vulnerable, was unprecedented. And a massive infrastructure grew up to make sure that it did not happen. By 1874, two and a quarter million people, mostly men, belonged to friendly societies that provided both death and sickness benefits; millions more, their spouses, were insured for a funeral only. Six hundred and fifty thousand men and women belonged to local burial societies registered with the government, and hundreds of thousands more must have belonged to the many thousand small burial clubs that remained unregistered. In addition, more than a million belonged to so-called collection societies, commercial ventures that were founded to insure primarily women and children not covered in other ways. These societies took their names from the collectors who went door to door, mostly on Saturdays after wages were paid, to receive the weekly premium of a few pence per head. Much to the consternation of middle-class observers who thought there were better uses for hard-earned surplus income, if the Victorian working class saved for anything, it saved for death. (The worry that working-class mothers killed or neglected their children to collect funeral insurance was the fantastical version of these fears.) As one West Country woman said, justifying her membership in a burial society, "What did a poor woman work for, but in hopes she should be put out of the world in a tidy way?" "Most illogical, inconsequential and light hearted, this, but travellers in the valley of the shadow of death are apt to be light hearted," as Dickens's narrator said of Betty Higden in Our Mutual Friend. 

Why would a poor woman deny herself the small pleasures of this life in order to ensure a tidy exit for her corpse? What exactly made going to the grave in "grim one hearse in a jolly round trot," as the poet writes, so sad and so terrifying that great sacrifices would be made to avoid it? The answer is probably not that the West Country woman Betty Higden feared that her death would not leave a gap in the world. The poor probably would not have imagined otherwise. And those who could afford grand funerals and proper memorials probably knew in their hearts that the same fate would befall them. The life of the city as the essayist and critic William Hazlitt noted, does not stop even when one of its great and good dies; those who once seemed so essential are soon not missed as the world rushes on without them. The truth is that the pauper funeral takes us, and the Betty Higdens of the world, back to Diogenes. No one sheds a tear because the pauper really did not matter in the world; he makes a noise only now that his carcass—the used-up and lifeless flesh that might as well be thrown to the beasts, "his cloudy" the lump of earth—is bouncing to the grave as fast as the horse can rush on without them. The truth is that the pauper funeral takes us, and the Betty Higdens of the world, back to Diogenes. No one sheds a tear because the pauper really did not matter in the world; he makes a noise only now that his carcass—the used-up and lifeless flesh that might as well be thrown to the beasts, "his cloudy," the lump of earth—is bouncing to the grave as fast as the horse can draw it. We should not care what becomes of the dead—cloudy bodies—that are not, and cannot be, of any more use to us. But we do. Dread of a pauper funeral is in this sense like everything having to do with the care of the dead and the work they do: born of the imagination and of projection. Those who watch the wretched hearse, the poet says, "should be joyful to think, when by death you're..."
The sense of the pauper funeral as the abyss of death comes from imagining oneself dead and imagining the feelings of others as they imagine us. It is about the work of the dead at a particular time. The question now becomes more focused: what in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made the pauper funeral a major part of this work?

One answer is that it is a special case of sympathy for the dead that we have already encountered, a trickle-down of what philosophers were saying about the rise of sympathy in modern society more generally. Adam Smith recognized in all of us that the ground zero of sympathy is the sympathy for the body in the grave that is, in turn, sympathy for our own prospective dead bodies. It is a feeling that gives rise to the fear of mortality that besets us all and to the only antidote to it that this world offers. With the imagined prospect of our own abjection comes the hope of something better, of a continued social existence, of one last gesture of regard. We can imagine basking in its glow even if we know that it is impossible. Saving while alive to avoid a pauper funeral makes this possible for ourselves and is a kindness to kin and neighbors; it creates the conditions for the continuity of communities and of generations through the dead. That is, it creates the conditions of spectatorship and caring that we imagine for ourselves. The pauper funeral, like the new humanitarianism of the eighteenth century, is the fruit of the sentimental revolution.

But this answer pushes the question one step back: what are the specific changes in the cultural history of the corpse that make a sentimental attachment to a dead body so urgent and so demanding? They are of three sorts. First, the pauper funeral was the dopplegänger of the proper funeral. What one generation might have regarded as decent became in the next shabby and in the one after that dishonorable. No funeral, however miserable, in the nineteenth century was without a coffin; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—later in some places—burial in a shroud alone was commonplace. Much more also came to be demanded of funerals than ever before: the body on its way to the grave took on new work of claiming space, power, and respect for new constituencies. As the proper funeral became more elaborate and more freighted with meaning, its opposite, the pauper funeral, became more dreadful. A theater of presence—the corpse on its way to the grave—created a theater of absence: no one was there to watch a procession that was almost too minimal to be noticeable even if anyone cared.

Second, the pauper funeral became the stage for the great nineteenth-century conversation about the new commercial and industrial order, about what would become of society—an early-nineteenth-century term—in the age of the cash nexus. The pauper funeral was a synecdoche for the meaning of poverty and pauperism. "There are so many things that cash will not pay," as Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1839, on the eve of the greatest working-class movement of the nineteenth century, Chartistism. The chorus of "The Pauper's Drive"—"Rattle His Bones over the stones / He's only a pauper whom nobody owns!"—speaks in this language. The pauper who is living may have owned his own labor. But after her death, no one wanted to buy it. She was unsalable. She was, in terms of the market, worthless. Since the late eighteenth century, "pauper" had come to mean not only what it had always meant—someone with no property, dependent on charity—but specifically someone who was the object of poor relief. It became an administrative category. The Poor Law reform of 1834 gave new resonance to this meaning under its terms the state would offer the poor—this was the "principle of least eligibility"—less in relief than whatever someone in the least remunerative employment on the open market might earn. As we already saw with burials, many thought that the condition of society could be calibrated by how it cared for the poor. Theodore Lyman, scion of a distinguished Boston family, visited Europe after he graduated from Harvard in 1810. He devotes a whole chapter to burial in his published account of Italy: the poor who died in the hospital, he writes with obvious distaste, are thrown naked and without coffins into pits where they lie "rotting, ulcerated, marked with white-blueish spots and streaks of black" until the pit is full. The authorities never failed to pay for a mass, although the body was "thrown upon the pit as if it were carrion." Such, he sniffs, a proper Protestant and man of New England, "is a Christian burial."720

But in England, even without specific legal and administrative reforms, the poor over the course of the eighteenth century, especially in London and other rapidly growing cities and in places of "surplus population," were slipping into documented worthlessness. They consumed, over time, more than they produced: about 850,000 families, according to Gregory King (1648–1712), one of the pioneers of social statistics, decreased the wealth of England. (Some half a million supposedly increased it.) Respectable and unrespectable alike—the widow who had once kept a good house and the whore, the vagabond and the fallen artisan—were or could be reduced to worthlessness. In life the pauper was a drain on the commonwealth; in death she was pure waste, a relic that might only be redeemed if it could somehow find a use in anatomy theaters or, more fantastically, in marling the field. Anonymous mass graves in urban churchyards and in specialized new grounds belonging to poorhouses starting in the early eighteenth century and the mass graves in the nineteenth-century cemeteries largely worked to erase the poor from the community of the dead. The pauper funeral was a chief instrument of this vanishing act.

It was a reducio of a new kind of poverty, the ground zero of social atomism, as Karl Polanyi described it in his masterpiece The Great Transformation, about the
defense of the social body. Alive, the pauper was alone; dead, the pauper's body was utterly bereft, without any visible link to the living. Biological and social deaths were simultaneous; the pauper was already gone. Nothing, as the poem says, seemed as desolate and isolated as the one-horse hearse with its pauper load. To be "Only a pauper whom nobody owns" was to be in the full darkest of the new social order: ownerless, unwanted, culturally unsustainable.

Third, there were new political, medical, and cultural exigencies. The modern world is a great new age of exhumation, reconstruction, and dismemberment. Bodies are dug up and reburyied to right, or to revenge, some wrong of the past, to create memorial communities, to shape or reshape history, to assimilate their component parts into new scientific narratives, to advance medical knowledge and training, to entertain the curious. What was once largely a concern for the fate of saint's bodies, because they bridged our world with the world beyond, came to embrace lesser mortals. In this context, the pauper funeral became the *mise en abyme* of the dead who had no place where they belonged or anyone who wanted them; the dissected cadavers of friendless bodies are its nadir.

The pauper funeral comes into focus as its antithesis, the funeral of public standing and regard. These are part of broader changes, of course—the elaboration of royal rituals and its trickle-down effect; the rise of voluntartistic organizations of all sorts that, among other things, cared for their dead; the advent of the well-ordered parade and march that gained prominence at the expense of less disciplined forms of collective action. Not only the press but commemorative pottery, engravings, medals, and the like gave the funeral a cultural power it had not hitherto had. In sum, civil society needed the dead and gave them new platforms for action. Nation, class, and religion needed them too. But there is also a more internal history of the funeral generally that exposes the pauper funeral as a humiliating residue left when decency is stripped away.

Funereal sumptuary law, in principle at least, governed the old regime. There were rules for what the dead were entitled to, just as there were for the living. The College of Heralds, an institution of the Tudor chivalric revival that prescribed and organized the burial rituals for those with a claim to heraldic identification, from the king, aristocracy, and gentry to citizens and burgesses who were "free within the city," held a monopoly on public funerals sanctioned by a royal charter and based on the idea that one's niche in the upper reaches of a hierarchic order was more or less given. The funeral made it manifest. The heralds kept score. For the elite—for those with a claim to have their actions, words, and rituals express "the order of symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern society," as the sociologist Edward Shils puts it—the heraldic funeral was meant to represent rank with great clarity and precision. A king, for example, was allowed fifteen mourners, an earl or a viscount nine, a knight five, a gentleman two. A knight's funeral had all the regalia of a baron's with the exception of "bannerox"—extra-wide banners on which were represented the relationship of the dead to his ancestors. (The Duke of Norfolk required more than a dozen to display his pedigree.) A "citizen" could expect everything a knight received with the exception of a sword. The college and its officials ensured that the funerals it arranged were at once mirrors of hierarchy and specific mnemonic devices to remind viewers and participants of the deceased's place in the world order. In principle at least, social standing was assured, and the funeral was not a locus of anxiety: God's judgment of the soul was beyond human influence, and one's earthly reputation was too deeply grounded in the world order to be susceptible to human judgment.

The funeral of the Elizabethan soldier, poet, and courtier Sir Philip Sidney, who died in storybook fashion as a knight on the field of Flanders, is exemplary of the old regime public funeral. By nineteenth-century standards, it was small, at most seven hundred people. The funeral of London's fire chief in 1861 was five times as big: Winston Churchill's funeral, to which Sidney's has been compared, was of another order of magnitude. But Sidney's was as large as it could be or needed to be, for to be larger would have been to go beyond the bounds of the community that it defined and of which it was a model. Thirty-two poor men for the "thirty-two years of his age" led the procession. Poor men, women, or children were customary attendants in elite funerals until the late seventeenth century, performing a dual role as living reminders of the deceased's benevolence and as bearers of the blessedness that was still thought to inhere in poverty. Representatives of Sidney's regiment followed the poor; then came his servants; then his heraldic devices; then, in order of precedence, sixty gentleman and yeoman servants of distinguished participants; then the esquires "among his kindred and friends" (sixty in number), followed by ten knights, the two categories distinguished by their collars; then his horse of the field and his horse for state and chivalric occasions; then more banners, followed by heralds carrying spurs, sword, and gauntlet. Following these came the corpse, borne by the dead man's friends; then came mourners of the appropriate number; then barons and earls; and then, after various others, the more ordinary, though richly dressed, folk of the grocers' company to which Sidney belonged. All was done in exquisite order to the dictates of the King of Arms, who marched as well. It was intensely inward-looking: Sidney's friends, in order, among the great; their servants in order; flags, banners, bannerox, telling anyone who could decode them of the deceased's relationship to those alive and those dead. It was hugely impressive. The diarist John Aubrey was deeply impressed and remembered seeing as a boy the magnificent visual record of this extraordinary pageant engraved on a roll that when unfurled covered the whole wall of a house.
Though manifestly expensive, Sidney's funeral was not a reflection of his wealth. Nor was it a moment of judging his standing in civil society, as the nineteenth-century funeral was to become. The many "publics" of the nineteenth century that funerals helped to constitute did not yet exist. Rather the great heraldic funeral was a magnificent display of a given order. The funerals of the great were essentially rituals of inclusion for a small band of men and a show of status that expressed the deceased's place in a well-defined, if sometimes contested, community of superiors, equals, and dependents. They were said to be "suitable to the quality" (that is, the rank) of the deceased. Those that the heralds orchestrated, for a considerable fee, were in general the most elaborate and expensive; they took weeks or months to organize; they involved hundreds, even thousands, of yards of black cloth for mourning clothes, church drapes, and the like; they involved hundreds of mourners and marchers; they included great feasts. The record expenditure was for the Earl of Northumberland in 1489—more than £1,000—but funerals of the great aristocracy often cost in that range. (This sum would have the buying power of something like £400,000 in 2000, by one estimate; it was two hundred times the yearly wages of an agricultural worker.)

"Decent suitableness to his [the deceased's] quality" was a vaguer version of sumptuary standards. Unlike the funerals of the eighteenth, and even more the nineteenth, century, the variation within social groups was huge. A knight or esquire in Kent might spend on average ten times as much as a yeoman and twenty times as much as a husbandman, but status was only loosely correlated with cost. Although the median cost of 116 gentlemen's funerals in seventeenth-century Lincolnshire was £4 2s.4d., the average of the lowest three was 9s.4d. and of the highest three £33 17s.4d. Out of seventy-one estates in the range £100—£150 (based on probate figures), the median deduction for the funerals was £2, the average of the lowest three 7s.3d., and of the highest three £9 19s.3d. Food was a far more important part of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century funeral than a procession that made a claim on public space. How much food was loosely dictated by the "suitableness" criterion? Magnates fed thousands of their extended families, that is, all those in some way dependent on them: 1,900 ate at the Duke of Norfolk's funeral in 1524; twenty-eight extra cooks were hired for the Duke of Rutland's in 1612. But even very poor people, those supported by the parish, fed the humble few who saw them into the grave with bread, beer, and special cakes. Among the relatively prosperous, there were also gifts—mourning rings, hatbands, handkerchiefs—and perhaps a funeral sermon, especially in the last decades of the seventeenth century. All told, although there were status-appropriate expenditures, there was no standard respectable funeral, costing a specified amount, with specified accoutrements, to which the ordinary person or even the very great aspired. The funeral was less a parade than a specialized ritual and feast to which the greater or lesser part of the relevant community was invited to witness the beginning of the end of the social life of the dead.

In the eighteenth century this began to change, in part because the material resources for creating elaborate funerals as resonant forms of consumption and social mobility became available. The late-seventeenth-century diarist Abraham de la Pryme complained that when Queen Mary died, the price of black cloth jumped from 10s. to 20s. a yard; in the nineteenth century one could get more than ten yards of French cashmere for the price of one yard at the inflated price de la Pryme reported. The Industrial Revolution had made black cloth of all sorts abundant. The first private carriage in Manchester was not acquired until 1758; by 1850, there were 1,009. Parades of the sort we see in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century funeral prints would have been impossible earlier. Relative plenty made the massive modern funeral possible. But plenty was at the service of something else. As commentators in the eighteenth century noted, money was the great solvent of the old order, and bodies, by making claims on public space, labored to create something new in the space that money cleared. As Daniel Defoe put it in an early work:

But England, modern to the last degree
Borrows or makes her own nobility
Wealth however got in England makes
Lords of mechanics, of rakes.
Antiquity and birth are needless here;
"Tis impudence and money makes a peer.

"Gold and silver," said Dr. Johnson a half century later with some annoyance, "destroy feudal subordination." Of course, mobility through acquired wealth had always been possible, but never before so dramatically and so visibly. The Elizabethan world order represented by funerals like Sidney's was shattered in an age whose central concerns were not primarily rank and glory but rather, as one of the greatest historians of the eighteenth century, Sir Lewis Namier, put it, "property, contract, trade and profits." A sign of the times was that the College of Arms lost its monopoly over heraldic funerals the same year the Bank of England was founded. William III refused to renew the commissions that gave the heralds sole authority to adjudicate the use of heraldic devices and to pressure those who used them without authorization in special courts. In fact, the monopoly was never complete and was hard to enforce. Many people who were entitled to a heraldic funeral saved money by not hiring the College and made do with what they could procure locally. Nevertheless, the heralds helped organize some of the great state funerals.
of the nineteenth century. But something had changed. "Commerce," as a late-eighteenth-century historian of the College noted, "rewarded her votaries with a profusion of wealth." While England still had privileged orders, he continued, "they are attainable by all who merit them." 77

Shortly after the Bank was founded and the College lost its monopoly, a new kind of tradesman was born; the term "undertaker," meaning a contractor who specialized in arranging funerals, entered English in 1698. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, anyone with enough money could buy a funeral like Sidney's. Profiting from the decline of the heralds, this novel class of men rented out cloaks, hangings, escutcheons, coach coverings, and even coaches to whoever could afford them. They arranged for the printing of invitations and the ordering of mourning rings and scarves; they organized the great processions of the urban funeral. It was a massive mobilization of resources for a great show in death. From one stock, an undertaker could furnish a hundred funerals; what had been restricted to a few could now be bought relatively cheaply. "Since the method of these undertakers have got a footing, persons of ordinary rank may, for the value of fifty pounds, make as great a figure as the nobility or gentry did formerly with the expense of more than five hundred pounds ... the gaiety and splendour both of the nobility and gentry is hereby very much eclipsed so that not many of them do in this exceed the show of the common people." Undertakers were purveyors of falseness, men who traded in lies and deception. As a London guide to various trades noted in 1747, "the undertakers' business is to watch death and to furnish out the funeral ... with as much pomp and feigned sorrow as the heirs or successors of the deceased chose to purchase." The poet Robert Blair wrote more pointedly about what they were hiding. Denial of death is not a twenty-first-century problem alone.

Ye undertakers, tell us,
Midst all the gorgeous figures you exhibit
Why is the principle concealed, for which
You make this mighty stir?—'Tis wisely done.
What would offend the eye in a good picture,
The painter casts discreetly into the shades.

That "principle" can be read as the body, "which in the nostril smells horrible" and is paraded in finery, or as Death itself, from which the living had best avert their gaze and notice. But it is also money, for which undertakers "let out their persons by the hour." 78

The falseness of the seventeenth century became a large measure of the truth by the nineteenth. Money made the man, or at least went a long way toward doing so; and death became the occasion for a final accounting, a stocktaking of worldly success. Of course, there were other metrics: virtue, martyrdom, political standing, fraternal ties. But it took money to publicize them. The funeral became more and more a standardized commodity whose cost could be matched with exquisite precision to the class and degree of "respectability" of the deceased. When one bought a funeral, one bought a more or less splendid parade, each additional bauble, each horse, each feather or set of nails adding to the base price. Bit by bit, finery accumulated, and by looking at the account books of an undertaker who specialized in pauper funerals, we can begin to see the bounds of decency in death. J. H. Wick was under contract to the City of London Poor Law Union. It allowed the poor to add what little they could to the basics without reducing its subsidy: The unadorned pauper funeral—a plain pine coffin, four bearers, and rental of a pall made of rough woven cloth—cost the Union £1 15s. By the standards of the "grim one-horse hearse in a jolly round trot," this was generous. A name was the first luxury: an inscribed coffin plate cost 2s.6d.—desirable despite, or perhaps because, the body itself was headed for the anonymity of a common grave. For 6s.6d., the poor could buy a row of nails all round, black and shiny; at that price, such decoration was in less demand. Wick's account book makes clear that it was the making of a little finer procession that was most wanted. Aside from the plate, an extra man—presumably a mute—to attend and look sorrowful, who cost 3s.6d., and the "best pall" to cover the coffin at 2s.6d. were the most popular add-ons. 79

The nineteenth-century commercial funeral was built in this fashion, and there was almost no limit to accessories that could be had from the stores of funereal consumer goods produced by the new industrial economy. Coffin furniture became a staple of the Birmingham metal trades beginning in 1769, and great quantities of decorative metal fell from its presses. From one catalog an undertaker could order wholesale angels and flowers, white for infants at 1s.9d. each, for children, white at 5s.6d., and black at 8s.6d. Pairs of small angel handles cost 15s. (white) or 18s. (black) by the dozen. Cotton, wool, and silk mills produced staggering amounts and varieties of cloth to be made into drapes, mourning clothes, hats, scarves, or gloves. By 1870, more than fifteen hundred people in the town of Whitby (where the fictional Count Dracula disembarked in England) worked making jet mourning jewelry. And of course one could choose from coffins of oak, elm, or pine, decorated with various qualities of nails, lined with various qualities of cloth, and furnished with the mattress of one's choice. Very expensive funerals added a lead inner coffin. Even feathers for the mutes hired from the undertaker, for the horses, and for various coaches were available in astounding variety. 80

The funeral of a respectable workingman was constructed from a modest collection of such items. From the advertisement of a London burial society we
learn in almost obsessive detail what kind of a funeral a 2d. per week subscription would buy:

a strong Elm Coffin, covered with fine Black, and finished with Two Rows all around close drove with Black Japanned Nails, and adorned with rich ornamental Drops, a handsome Plate of Inscription, Angel above the Plate and Flower beneath, and four Pair of handsome Handles with wrought Gripes... For Use, a handsome Velvet Pall, Three Gentlemen's Cloaks, Three Crepe Hat bands, Three Hoods and Scarfs, and Six Pairs of Gloves: Two Porters equipped to attend the Funeral, a Man to attend the same with Band and Gloves.181

A reasonably posh bourgeois funeral required more items from the shopping list; like a Victorian parlor, it was burdened with materiality. One bill, for example, lists a shell for the body, covered with crepe, £2; a lead coffin, £7; an outside coffin covered in silk with furniture, £2 7s.; a brass plate, £2 12s. Omitting several items but still on the first page of the accounting: a set of velvet and feathers for the coach, £3 7s.6d.; another set for the hearse and horse (each animal had a feather on its head), £7 19s.; and yet another set for the chariot and horse, £1 17s. This excludes wages for bearers, feathermen, undertakers' assistants, and the like, scarves, gloves, and many other items. The meaning of the funeral as a consumer good that defined the place of the deceased in society could thus be made clear to all. (The effect of all this on mourning is of course another matter. I am speaking here only of the corpse cutting a figure in the world.) Cassel's Household Guide in its 1870 edition listed various classes of funerals from £3 5s. for the poorest to £53 for the respectable middle class. In 1843, however, a parliamentary report announced that, at least in high-priced London, the lowest tradesman, in station "not much beyond that of a mechanic," needed a £10 2s. funeral, while the average prosperous tradesman required one for £50; "a professional person's" cost at least £100.182

The police chief of Stockport, near Manchester, testified at another parliamentary investigation in 1854 that the funeral expenses of a child (though the same could be said of adults) depended on "the differences in the parent's notions of respectability... in a very low class of life £2, others £4, £8 and some even £10." The point is not the exact amount—he estimates are probably high—but that a precise relationship could be established between social standing and the cost of a funeral, and that cost was manifest in the parade that was presented to the public.183

As the standards of respectability went up, the opportunity for the poor to meet them declined. The old regime norm of a place in the churchyard was under threat: the new cemeteries lived off of but hid the poor as much as possible in unmarked mass graves. There was also a significant expansion of burial places dedicated exclusively to paupers. Archeologists have unearthed more than one thousand bodies from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on the grounds of the Bristol infirmary. None were in coffins: these were the completely disposable poor. More than six hundred bodies, dating from the 1750s to the mid-nineteenth century, were excavated from the burial ground of the Newcastle infirmary. Of those intact enough to be studied, many showed signs of post-mortem surgery—autopsy or dissection. Archeologists have also found "medical waste" from the Nottingham General Hospital, probably from a teaching collection discarded after the Anatomy Act. Most of the new eighteenth-century hospitals must have had burial grounds for those unfortunate enough to die there, even if they have not been dug up. (No one of substance died in hospitals, which generally tried as best they could to keep out those who were mortally ill.) The workhouses and asylums of eighteenth-century London and other cities also had dedicated burial places. As the living poor were segregated, so too were the dead.184

In this context, the pauper funeral became the final stamp of failure. It is almost as if it had been consciously or unconsciously wrought as a new marker of status in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. The poor, instead of being those who would always be amongst us and who indeed occupied a spiritually privileged category, became those who could not or would not sell their labor and who consequently had to be supported, more to assure political stability than by reason of benevolence, at some minimal level above starvation. With the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the so-called New Poor Law, this notion was finally given its full legal articulation; its evolution since the seventeenth century had been slow and irregular. Similarly, the pauper funeral as a distinguishable category of burial and a sign of the new poverty appeared in different places at different times. In Oxfordshire's house of corrections as late as 1775, an anonymous deaf-mute woman who died while in custody was buried with a full complement of bearers, not just a cart to the churchyard, and with a small party of beer, bread, and cheese for those who laid her out and those who carried her to the grave, as well as with the accustomed peal of bells at the church. As late as 1830 in rural parishes, beer, cheese, and bread for bearers, candles for a wake, and the use of a pall, all costing 18s. to 22s., were still common at a time when these same parishes, on the roundsman system, forced unemployed men to break stones from dawn to dusk for a shilling per day. A respectable funeral was among the last of the old communal rights to go.185

The right to decent burial disappeared first in cities and in parishes burdened by large numbers of the extraparochial poor, those without a settlement that entitled them to the rights of the parish. It fell victim to the process by which

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181 "The Cemetery and the New Regime" 325

The Cemetery and the New Regime 325
funerals to be combined, thus giving the poor no choice as to when their relatives or friends were to be buried and creating through the display of identical unmarked parish coffins a striking image of anonymity and individual worthlessness. Sunday was the most common day. Whether it was Edwin Chadwick or his rival Lewis who forbade Unions to pay for the ringing of bells at pauper funerals is irrelevant; the point is that the degree of shabbiness had become a question for administrative adjudication. In the same spirit in which the commissioners disallowed public funds for workhouse Christmas dinner on the grounds that some of the working poor might not have it so good, they created the degrading spectacle of the pauper burial. Just as the proper funeral came to be defined quite precisely by its cost, so also the pauper one. Gone was the variety of the eighteenth-century churchwardens' accounts; neatly lined "Relieving Officers' Application and Report Books" give the standard entries, depending on the size of coffin or grave and fees; nothing more.

By 1850, the pauper funeral had become perhaps the dominant representation of that vulnerability, of the possibility of falling irrevocably from the grace of society, of exclusion from the values of one's culture. It was an image that worked on the poor; they would, as one observer put it, "sell their beds out from under them sooner than have parish funerals." Anxiety about pauper burial did not, of course, stand alone in pushing the poor into industrial civilization, but ignominious burial was one of the most powerful ways in which the relationship between money and standing was made manifest, a metaphor for the meaning of consumption, a vehicle for the creation of desire that made the new economic order possible. To avoid a pauper funeral the poor saved through burial clubs, friendly societies, or the large "collecting" societies; they borrowed and repaid pawn-shop loans; they tried to live frugally. The rules of the various burial clubs and societies in many cases denied benefits to families of those who died as a result of profligate lives (e.g., from alcoholism or venereal disease), and they demanded sobriety and civility at meetings. Thus, to provide oneself with a dignified burial was, consciously or not, to abandon the plebian ways of the old order and to participate in the respectability of the new.

Before the late eighteenth century, the bodies of the humble dead had only rarely claimed the streets of Europe's cities. In the modern era they did so in considerable numbers and to great effect. The other side of the pauper funeral is not only the proper funeral but the extraordinary funeral. Whether their funerals were the technically public—paid for or organized by the state—or private is less important than that their bodies did public work. The funerals in 1793, planned by the painter Jacques-Louis David, of the child soldier-martyrs of the French Revolution, Joseph Bara and Agricol Viala, who died fighting the enemies of the nation, begin a new era. There was the unprecedented and remarkable burial procession...
on 22 March 1848, of 189 dead workers who had fallen on the barricades in Berlin on the night of 18—19 March. The authorities had wanted a common funeral with the soldiers who also died; the middle-class liberals and their working-class supporters insisted that only separate funerals would make clear that a revolution had happened. Rich and poor paid for the sad festivities; theaters held fundraisers—Lessing’s Nathan der Weise was on offer at one. Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic officials met the bodies as they entered the cemetery. And, most important, the autocratic Prussian King Frederick IV doffed his helmet in “forced homage” as the coffins and carts rolled by: "—, father of six, shot down at the barricades . . ." A name, an identification, a revolutionary act made publicly manifest through the bodies of the dead. (The king also promised a constitution, a promise that the failure of the Frankfort Parliament allowed him to renege on.) Adolph Menzil’s unfinished picture offers only the promise of an extraordinary mass funeral moving through the public spaces of a capital city that Sunday (fig. 5.26). In other words, the dead were very much still on the barricades.99

There were many more such moments, on a much smaller scale, in the making of the English working class. In some cases, it is the forensic dissection table and the coroner’s inquest that bear witness to political repression. John Rhodes took a sabre wound in the head and was “dreadfully crushed in body” when the yeomanry cleared the great reform meeting that he was attending at “Peterloo” Fields in Manchester on 16 August 1819. The magistrates who had ordered the attack ordered that the coroner perform an autopsy to find the cause of Rhodes’s death, one of eleven. Rhodes, it was found, “died of natural causes.” The inquest on Edmund Dawson was slightly less absurd: “Willful murder not allowed.” But investigations of death did not always go so smoothly for the authorities. The jury in the inquest on the body of John Lees, the son of Robert, a small factory owner, produced a minor cause célèbre. Sitting in Oldham and dominated by radicals, it produced the most complete account of the yeomanry’s attack that we have. Lees’s father had refused to accept that his son’s death on 7 September was the result of anything other than the saber wound and trampling he had sustained from the cavalry when it unlawfully cleared what he regarded as a peaceful demonstration from St. Peter’s Field. The surgeon whom the son consulted on the day after the attack insisted on an inquest; two well-known radical solicitors represented his bereaved father. At stake in the examination over John’s corpse was the interpretation of 16 August: an illegal attack on unarmed citizens or a justified suppression of a potentially violent revolutionary gathering99

The local coroner did what he could to suppress the hearing: sending assistants who would not carry on without him; refusing to hear witnesses; failing to view the body. The solicitors who represented the interests of Lees and of the radicals more generally insisted on as many witnesses as they could muster. They brought them to Oldham by the coachload. Most had not actually seen what happened to John but testified to what they took to be the unprovoked violence of the mounted yeomanry. Their aim was to create a record of illegality. Some had intimate knowledge of John’s fate. “I have seen many dead people,” said the wife of a shoemaker who had laid out the body, “but I never saw such a corpse as this in all my life.” There was a dark purple bruise on his right shoulder; there was scarcely a place on his back free of bruises as if he had been “tied to a halbard and flogged.” She insisted that she had seen the body before it was cold, she understood that death brought with it discoloration, but what she had observed was not natural. Thomas Ferrand, the coroner, had not thought it necessary to view the body himself. Under pressure, he ordered that it be exhumed. He was awakened at 3:00 A.M. to be told that a crowd had gathered at the churchyard, thinking that his men were stealing the body that he had planned to view at six o’clock. There were, he said, thousands of people in the Oldham churchyard to prevent him from filling up the grave again before the arrival of Lees’s solicitor. The crowd, like that at the inquest, was, he said, out of control. In the end, Ferrand managed to avoid rendering a verdict by citing a technicality in the Court of King’s Bench: the law required that the coroner and the jury see the body at the same time. This
had not happened. There was considerable protest that the government of the day had managed to suppress a finding, but verdict or not. 618 pages about how the body of young John Lees came to be dead are the most complete record we have of England's most notorious case of political repression.91

The public fate of others of the dead of Peterloo was more poignant, comic, sentimental, and strange. When the horse belonging to Orator Hunt, editor of the major radical paper of the day and a speaker at the great reform meeting in Manchester we know as "Peterloo," died en route home after his master was released from prison on bail, he was given a funeral attended by thousands of ordinary people and buried under a weeping willow with a headstone that read, "Alas Poor Bob." Seven years later, his bones were exhumed, like so many, to serve other purposes: in his case, to make snuff boxes, one of which was presented to his former owner.94

Some working-class funerals were self-consciously epic in scale. "Nothing is more calculated to give more exalted feelings" to kin and comrades "than to witness a respectable and numerous attendance at the last rites of a brother," wrote the newspaper of the Grand National Consolidated Trades' Union in 1834, just months before the government cracked down on it. The story was of the burial service of a Barnsley linen operative: "what man, that has a rational feeling for himself, his family, and his country, would not be a unionist,... all to be surrounded with laurels in life, and when dead to be clad with them." The funeral parade was spectacularly large and iconographically rich: a band and mutes dressed in black, the officers of various lodges with black sashes and white rosettes, then bearers of white rods and crepe, then several choirs four abreast, then the body borne by three officers clothed in white on each side, then other officials, then the secretary of the deceased's lodge carrying the Bible on a black velvet cushion, then his whole lodge, then other lodges all wearing rosettes. Fifteen hundred marchers in all, it was reported, with five thousand spectators. (Pioneer, the weekly reporting this news a respectable and numerous attendance at the last rites of a brother," wrote the newspaper of the Grand National Consolidated Trades' Union in 1834, just months before the government cracked down on it. The story was of the burial service of a Barnsley linen operative: "what man, that has a rational feeling for himself, his family, and his country, would not be a unionist,... all to be surrounded with laurels in life, and when dead to be clad with them." The funeral parade was spectacularly large and iconographically rich: a band and mutes dressed in black, the officers of various lodges with black sashes and white rosettes, then bearers of white rods and crepe, then several choirs four abreast, then the body borne by three officers clothed in white on each side, then other officials, then the secretary of the deceased's lodge carrying the Bible on a black velvet cushion, then his whole lodge, then other lodges all wearing rosettes. Fifteen hundred marchers in all, it was reported, with five thousand spectators. (Pioneer, the weekly reporting all this, had a circulation of twenty thousand, with many times that number of readers and those who heard it read out loud. Thus the funeral was far more public than was reflected in the numbers who actually watched or participated in it.) "How elated did every spectator appear, and with what amazement did they gaze upon the whole movement." The dead in procession made the movement manifest to itself: a hundred women in black robes with white hoods and five hundred trade unionists carrying springs of ivy followed the coffin of a worker in Hincley; women in white hoods and members of eleven trade societies made up the procession of a Derby carpenter; all the building trades were in the funeral of a Birmingham woodsawyer. Funerals, like initiation rituals, created new collectivities, new communities of the dead and the living.95

This was true of the Chartists later in the century and of Methodists and other denominations earlier. Political martyrs claimed the streets as never before. The elaborate funeral of Samuel Holberry, a young militant Sheffield Chartist and unemployed distillery worker of the humblest of origins—he was one of nine children of an agricultural laborer—who died at age twenty-seven from tuberculosis and harsh prison treatment, drew a crowd in the tens of thousands. His corpse mobilized all the material accessories of a grand bourgeois funeral—the mutes, the mourning coaches, the beautifully decorated hearse—but also the political banners ("Is Chartism Dead?" CLAYTON and HOLBERRY The Martyrs of the People) and, most important, the crowds: conservatively twenty thousand, said the Whig Sheffield Iris; nearer fifty thousand, said the Chartist Northern Star; somewhere in between, said another witness. But whatever the number, the multitude was gloriously manifest: the Star describes several views but thought that it was on Sheffield Moor that the mighty multitude showed to the best advantage. (This notion, borrowed from the theater, of "showing off well" was central to making nineteenth-century funerals public in a new way.) No previous assemblage in Sheffield of any sort, the paper said, had been on the scale of this funeral. And an active press made events like this even more public, even larger in the public imagination. The Northern Star had a circulation of around fifty thousand and as many as four hundred thousand readers. This was not a singular event. At the height of revolutionary agitation in June 1848, London Chartists stopped their round of meetings and plotting for the massive funeral of an East London silk weaver who had died, the coroner's jury insisted, of injuries inflicted by the police at the last of the decade's great demonstrations in Bethnal Green on 4 June 1848.96

And memories of the movement were kept alive by the dead in the decades afterward. On 19 June 1853, Benjamin Rushton, age sixty-eight, died—"poor, as many reformers had done"—in a village two miles from Halifax. "It was decided by the Chartists of Halifax that his funeral expenses should be borne by them," perhaps because he was in many ways a prototypical figure in the movement. Like a disproportionate number of the working-class leadership, he was a handloom weaver; he was a New Connection Methodist preacher, a Sunday School teacher, and a man who was all his life engaged in progressive causes, opposition to the New Poor Law, for example, before he embraced the People's Charter. His funeral was grander than the greatest aristocratic funerals of the seventeenth century, a requiem for a movement and a celebration of the community it had mobilized. The old Halifax Chartist Benjamin Wilson reports on Rushton's funeral in the memoir he wrote many years afterward in 1887. On Sunday, 26 June, Ernest Jones, a radical barrister, and R. C. Gammage, a shoemaker and the movement's first historian, led a procession of six of the oldest Chartists as pallbearers and
twelve of the younger ones as "conductors," wand bearers, followed by one hundred forty Oddfellows (members of England's biggest working-class fraternal organization), to Rushton's house to pick up his double-lined coffin. The cortège then began the two-mile walk to Halifax's new Lister Hill Cemetery, with its neoclassical chapel and fine bourgeois monuments. As it went, it gathered numbers. Five special trains brought people from Bradford. The local paper put the number marching at between six thousand and ten thousand. Wilson says that he will decline to give numbers but says that he saw more people that day than ever before or since and all other public funerals he had seen paled by comparison. Jones spoke at the graveside about the burial of a patriot and the "resurrection of a glorious cause." "There rests a working man, there rests a producer," he intoned. The funeral ceremony closed and a reform meeting began.997

When Jones himself, firebrand of the movement and a friend of Marx, jailed for his role in 1848, died in 1869, the Manchester Guardian reported that "many thousands of persons, for the most part of the working class," crowded the streets, and probably a thousand marched six abreast to the sounds of a brass band playing the "Dead March" (from Handel's Saul) as his body made its way to the grave. Six very old Chartisters who were identified by their radical lineage—"veterans of Peterloo," men who had witnessed the great radical massacre of 1819—led the procession. The coffin bearers were other old Chartists "associated," as the Times put it, "with Mr. Jones in the agitation of 1848." Then behind the coffin were his pallbearers: Mr. Jacob Bright, MP; Sir Elkanah Armitage, Lord Mayor of Manchester; Mr. C. H. Bazeley, the factory owner and liberal worthy; Mr. T. B. Potter, MP, among others. Thus the body of a man who had been jailed as a dangerous revolutionary nineteen years earlier was buried to the cheers of tens of thousands of his fellow citizens. His procession was an uncannily precise model of the political history of Manchester and of the fate of radicalism: the tumultuous uncertainty of the post-Napoleonic years when troops were garrisoned near the city to prevent serious unrest was glimpsed safely through aged Peterloo survivors; Chartism was manifest in the corpse of one of its leaders; and the representatives of Gladstonian liberalism, triumphant, brought up the rear.998

Fearnghus O'Connor's funeral in 1855 was the last and one of the largest Chartist demonstrations of the age. O'Connor had many passionate opponents and detractors, but, for better or worse, he was the most prominent and fiery of the movement's leaders: editor of the Northern Star (the major Chartist newspaper, with a circulation in the tens of thousands) and chair of the great April 1848 demonstration at Kennington Common that was both the apogee and the end of Chartism as a mass movement. He died on 30 August, penniless and insane, and was buried by subscription. G.W.M. Teynolds, a radical publisher and one of the most famous writers of his day, thought that, with the exception of the funerals of Admiral Nelson, Queen Caroline, and the Duke of Wellington, "no ceremonial of this description . . . has attracted during the present century such vast crowds to witness it." People started gathering in the working-class districts of the east, in the City and Finsbury; they marched to Bloomsbury and then on to his sister's house in Notting Hill; from there they went—between thirty thousand and forty thousand of them, according to the Times, which had every reason to play down the numbers; fifty thousand, others said—to Kensal Green. When the cemetery management closed the gates "against this vast mass of people," the crowd tore them down. Then O'Connor joined conservative politicians, generals, and circus managers. "He lived and died for us," read one of the banners.1000

The dead of new religious communities also became more public as they went to their graves. We do not know how many small funerals made claims on the space of the parish in the name of one group or other. John Wesley saw near Bath a group of children attending a coffin that was being carried into St. George's Church; when he came closer he saw that they were "our own children," and they were attending the corpse of one of their schoolfellows, who had died of smallpox. God thereby touched their hearts, he thought. Far more public was the funeral of Sammy Hick (1758–1829), a man who worked as a blacksmith well into his old age while on the side preaching conversion and witnessing its signs before large audiences of "gentle and simple" people. Some hundreds, we are told, went to Micklefield, a small village east of Leeds, and then formed a procession to carry the body to Aberford, a village two miles west. It swelled as it neared the churchyard to "no less than a thousand." The funeral was magnificent and, like many, it was reexperienced by the larger virtual community who read about it at the time and for decades to come.1000

There was a similar history at the other end of the social scale as funerals expanded in scale, access, and publicity. In the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries a "public funeral" had meant one organized by the College of Arms. Public funerals, in the sense that the state paid for them and oversaw their protocols, were essentially nonexistent for private citizens before the nineteenth century: three before 1800. Almost eighty years separated Isaac Newton's in 1727 and Admiral Nelson's in 1806. There were at least six more, besides Nelson's, by 1900. (Royalty, whose bodies and persons were public, are another story) The French state, which, at its revolutionary birth, invented the modern state funeral with the Pantheonization of Voltaire and Rousseau, was much more profligate in using its dead great men in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than was Britain: thirty-six state funerals under the Second Empire, eighty-one numbers; fifty thousand, others said—to Kensal Green. When the cemetery management closed the gates "against this vast mass of people," the crowd tore them down. Then O'Connor joined conservative politicians, generals, and circus managers. "He lived and died for us," read one of the banners.1000

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Great public funerals of the new age represented a level of pageantry and engagement of ordinary citizens unknown before; they were, so to speak, the official, state-sanctioned version of the community-making processions of the corpse that defined various forms of popular class politics and religion. Enormous crowds followed the body of the hero of Trafalgar, Admiral Nelson, in 1806 as his body traveled from Greenwich, along the river, and into the City. Once there, it rode in a funeral car shaped like a ship. Queen Caroline, the people’s hero during her infamous trial for adultery in 1819, aroused great passion and great crowds also when she was dead. Lord Liverpool, the prime minister, feared that the mob might seize her cortège or use the procession for radical purposes; he ordered that it skirt the City of London as it made its way from Hammersmith to the sea on its way back to where she was born in Brunswick. A crowd stood in the way; shots were fired and people killed as the body was forced onto the Marylebone Road; another barricade forced it south down Tottenham Court Road toward the city. There had been considerable reluctance on the part of the lord chamberlin’s office about having a funeral at all, but because she remained technically queen of England, protocol had to be followed.202

Few nineteenth-century public funerals were so politically fraught as the queen’s. The Duke of Wellington’s in 1852 had its problems: managing an overwhelming demand for tickets to the service in the cathedral and for the right to have a carriage in the parade, organizing the lying in state so that hundreds of thousands of people could file by the casket. But they were solved; as an example of a dead body bringing people into a common space, physically and emotionally, it was wildly and unprecedentedly successful. By conservative estimates, a million people, 5 percent of the kingdom’s population, were physically there; tens of millions more read about it. It was to the dead body what Britain’s 1851 Great Exhibition was to the Industrial Revolution: the grand occasion to show off a civilization. Its very scale bore witness to the productive capacities of industrial England: mechanical steam presses working around the clock could not keep up with the demand for the London Illustrated News’s account of the funeral. Two million copies were ultimately sold, but only after temporary shortages resulted in scalpers’ prices up to five times the normal cost. The twenty-seven-foot-long by seventeen-foot-wide monstrosity of a funeral car, modeled on that of Alexander the Great, was a triumph of the metal trades, which managed to melt down and mold twelve tons of old Waterloo cannons into some semblance of decorative form. (Never mind that it could not navigate the funeral route.) Because the railroads provided cheap transportation for the masses, almost a half million people could file by the coffin as Wellington lay in state. “Why, more visitors to London have come by the railroads to see the mighty Duke’s coffin than all London and Britain furnished as spectators to any royal funeral, or all royal funerals put together, since any living man was born,” proclaimed the London Illustrated. And more. The funeral was a sign of social cohesion; even thieves mingled with the public as ordinary subjects and purportedly did not ply their trade. It was a celebration of London, “the empress of cities,” and of England, in which “this event is to be solemnized as becomes the mightiest nation in the world.” It was a commentary on spiritual and “higher” things, the day on which the dominant utilitarian spirit of the age was to be forgotten; it was the final event of the French Revolution, its two great sons, Wellington and Napoleon, now dead—the one, as the papers all pointed out, having early on fought and destroyed the other. There was no end to the allegorical interpretations that could be attached to the funeral of the Great Duke.203

Perhaps only Victor Hugo’s and Adolphe Thiers’s funerals and the Pantheonization of Zola rivaled Wellington’s in bringing a crowd into the streets in the nineteenth century: numbers that amounted to half the population of Paris. Many, many more saw the funeral train of the dead President Lincoln as it made its way from Washington to Springfield. These were the dead in service to the nation. But there were thousands of nineteenth-century funerals in Europe and the New World that, while technically private (that is, arranged and paid for by friends and family without state subsidy), were really public, in the sense that they engaged the public and openly affirmed not only the values of a civilization generally but of specific communities. The worth of an individual, the regard in which he—and rarely she—was held was publicly made manifest. Thus, the deaths of Dissenting clergymen were marked by displays of denominational solidarity as well as of respect for someone in particular. “Multitudes” followed the body of the Methodist Rev. William Dawson for a mile and a half as it left Leeds; eighty-six carriages “containing friends of various ranks” continued on to the village where he was buried. Provincial culture celebrated itself in the funeral of its worthies. Forty thousand saw John Dalton, the great chemist and lion of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, lie in state. The account of the various parts of the almost mile-long procession takes thirty columns of small type: group by group, carriage by carriage all associated with the hero by virtue not of his place in a God-given hierarchy, but by his great energy and intelligence.204

The funeral of the great manufacturer, Titus Salt, made different sorts of claims. In part it appropriated the charisma of aristocracy to the new industrial order, aping in a curious way the great heraldic funerals of two and three centuries earlier. As one report noted with stunning clarity, “a stranger might have thought a prince had fallen, and the people had come to witness the funeral pageant on its way to the tomb of his royal ancestors.” His barons-in-chief, the foremen of his various departments, were bearers; loyal retainers, some four hundred who had been in his employ twenty years or more, were privileged to be allowed on