

Afterword

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The scythe of death in human hands parted communities, sometimes in spectacularly grotesque fashion, in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Low Countries and elsewhere. The final interrogation of the introduction's first paragraph, is a cunning, and perhaps intentionally ambiguous, provocation. 'Until death do us part' will resonate for English speakers as the words of the marriage vow in the 1662 edition of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer that have remained unchanged to the present day. From 1559 to 1662 the equivalent rubric was 'until death us depart', meaning 'separate', a version that is perhaps more apposite to this collection. And these English words in turn are a more or less literal translation of the Latin in the Sarum and York rites. The words 'Bis, dass der Tod uns scheidet', will have similar resonances for German Lutherans. The 1675 Quaker version of 'Till Death do Us Part' makes even more explicit what the limits of human power and the agency of God are in this matter: 'Until it shall please the Lord by death to separate us'. There are two parts to this claim: first, that the power to end a marriage is exercised solely at the discretion of God and second, that it is exercised solely through the agency of death. In any case no alternative way to end a marriage is implied.

But the dual claim that only God can separate humans joined in marriage and that she does it through death seems to have very little to do with the historical anthropology of the sort that so deeply informs this collection. Of course, from a secular perspective marriage and kinship rules are and have always been at the core of anthropological inquiry. And radical Protestants sought to reinterpret the meaning of marriage and how it might end, that is, to re-write anthropological norms in accord with new interpretations of scripture. The Puritan John Milton, for example, claimed the early sixteenth-century reformer Martin Bucer as an authority in one of his four tracts arguing for divorce as a godly alternative to death as a way of parting a couple.

But this is a byway. The agency of God in the phrase 'Till death do us part' has little to do with the essays you have just read, but the power of death in the creation of 'political and confessional identities' is what they are all about. 'Departing'. 'Separating'. And separating means also re-creating, making new communities from the shards of those rent apart. For 'marriage' implied in the provocative interrogation we might substitute the 'medieval Church', or the cities of the Low Countries torn by internal religious strife, or local communities. Amicable divorce was out of the question – that is the sort of peaceful ending of a contract that Milton imagined – and it was death that tore apart communities and created

the cultural foundations for new ones. The power, as in the marriage vow, still belonged to death; it is humans that wield it.

This is what the title says and the introduction stresses. Historical anthropology with a strong materialist basis – not the history of theological exegesis or the history of ideas – is the disciplinary lens of this collection. There is terrifying concreteness in how these essays depict the work of the dead. Humans smell the flesh of decaying bodies in church and use incense that both hides it and suggests an alternative: the sweetness of the blessed dead – saints – that stands in contrast to the stench of sin. Co-religionists smell the burning flesh of their martyrs and hurl the materials intended to mend the city's authority – the thudding stones – at their society's faultiness. Death works through the nose and through the other senses.

There is the sophisticated semiotics of death on offer: secret drownings that not only create a sublime terror but are meant also to stop the contagion of heresy by denying those brought to their death an audience. There is the destruction of tombs – a nearly universal instrument of severing a past from a present and from an imagined future cleansed of a past – and the making of collections of epitaphs that translate the lapidary deep histories of the buried dead into the flimsy, but easily reproducible medium of paper. These are perhaps a sort of Reformation version of the *liber memorialis*, the monastic books of the Middle Ages that recorded the names of the dead for whom the monks would pray. Engravings of religious violence, hanging from parlour walls, imbricate the intimate space of the household and its members with the religious and national communities that were born from the blood of their martyrs. And always a kind of ground base, the elegy that meant to comfort and to make the embrace of death somehow palatable and yet never quite able to do so.

In short, this collection of essays is about how humans 'sense and stage death' to break and remake communities as if they were the God of the marriage vows. It may be too obvious to add that death, un-staged, and sensed only as a pain of the heart, is also what parts – separates – those of us in one world – that of the living which we know and inhabit – from the unimaginably distant other world we cannot know. This is the most literal sense of the title 'Till Death do us part', intimate and at the same time cosmic, a sense that informs myths from Greek Orpheus and Eurydice to structurally similar ones of Native Americans. Death is the great divide and the great divider.

The question remains as to what gives humans the power to harness it for the fundamentally anthropological purposes described in these essays, that is, to take on the role of God in the marriage vow. Or, to put the question in a more secular form, how does death and the dead come to have the power that they wield? I have written a book of more than eight hundred pages without arriving at a satisfactory answer and will make no further effort here except to quote Antigone's words in Sophocles's tragedy on status of norms for the care of the dead:

They are the law of the gods, unwritten and secure.
They are not of today or yesterday
They live forever; none knows when first they were.

Thus, mutilating the dead, destroying their tombs, hiding their bodies, or erasing their names both is and is meant to be a purposeful violation of the laws of the gods, an existential political act.

The editors of this collection of essays ended by reflecting on their resonance in the world today. I want to end by simply listing the broader questions these provocative papers raised for me. I understand the long historical debate about whether executions should be public or not: whether death inflicted off stage is not more terrifying and hence politically effective than in public; whether the crowd watching an execution – participating in it as an audience – is not as likely to be corrupted as edified. I do not understand the longer history of secret judicial or extra-judicial state murder. Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary executions from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century were dramatically public and well represented in the visual arts and the literary imagination. On the other hand, the millions of victims of the Stalinist purges were overwhelmingly murdered in secret, as were the leaders of the 1956 Hungarian revolution. In the Argentine case, thousands simply disappeared. What, I wonder, is the history of this semiotics?

I think of the secularization of smell. In the sixteenth century it was between the smell of sanctity and the smell of sin. By the late eighteenth century, the foul and the fragrant were largely figured, as Alain Corbin has shown, along class lines. Or Rousseauian geography: a pure countryside – the smell of happiness – versus the misery and unhappiness of the city as described by Robert Muchembled. And there is the special problem of the smell of the dead. In early modern Europe miasma from decomposing human flesh above all the foul airs of the age – the excrement, the remains of animals – was believed to be particularly pathogenic. And still today, even though report after report shows that any number of dead humans – with a few exceptions, such as the victims of Ebola – are less threatening to health than a comparable number of live ones, medical professionals insist on disposing of them – victims of disasters to take a case in point – as quickly as possible, no matter how culturally disruptive that might be. It is odd how this perception of the dangers of the dead persists.

Continuities. I am struck by how in England, where the destruction of tombs in the sixteenth century was relatively limited and the Elizabethan state lent its authority to curtailing whatever iconoclastic energies remained, the collections of epitaphs flourished perhaps in response not to what iconoclasm did exist, but more as a response of a governing class making itself visible to itself through a record of the literary remains of its dead. John Weever's 1599 *Ancient Funerall Monuments* begat Wordsworth's more democratically informed 1810 *Essays on Epitaphs*. And it manifests the sensibilities that would inform collections of names of names on memorials of the Great War and the Vietnam memorial.

Paintings of the interiors of Dutch churches, stripped bare to white walls, show burials close to what had been the altar at the east end of the nave. The old habits persisted through a sort of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, what proper people did, when where one was buried ought to have made no difference. The Calvinist John Knox asked to be buried within feet of what had been the holiest ground of St. Giles, Edinburgh's cathedral, even though if pressed he could have offered no theological grounds for so rank a superstition. James Stewart, the Earl Moray, a leading Scottish iconoclast, was buried inside St. Giles; Knox preached the funeral sermon.

So, yes, 'Till Death do us Part'. Literary and visual representations made new communities visible to themselves. But, how shall we put it, in the context of the marriage vow?

The parted couple – the two confessional communities in relationship to each other but perhaps more the importantly the confession and the state – did not give up on each other quite so easily. It would take another revolution – the French one – and the economic and social revolutions that followed to give death a freer hand. And even then, much of the old remained. Cultures of death – more apposite here, changes in what it is worth dying for – change at a glacial pace.