

That-Which-Remains: A Phenomenological Reading of Two Eighteenth Century Texts on Death

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This article compares an eighteenth century treatise calling for the banning of church burial with a funeral sermon from the same period in relation to two questions. Where and to whom does that-which-remains after death belong? And how do the texts represent the nature of that-which-remains? The first section looks at the remains' conceptual position in relation to the space of the church, and in relation to the living and the dead. The second compares the texts on the basis that one sublimates the body, denying its physicality, while the other acts to reinforce the flesh's status as flesh. Drawing upon the thought of Heidegger and Derrida, the article concludes that both texts support arguments that eighteenth century considerations of the dead prefigure what would come to be the modern phenomenological understanding of death and the dead, arguing that they both engage with the phenomenological issue of death as the presencing of an absence.

THE TEXTS AND THEIR BACKGROUNDS

Both the texts under discussion in this article were written by Protestant clergymen. The first, *Seasonable considerations on the indecent and dangerous custom of burial in churches and church-yards (SC)*, was written by Thomas Lewis in 1721, and is a theologico-medical treatise combining ecclesiastical history with contemporary medical understanding to argue for the abolition of interment in churches and church-yards.¹ Lewis was a high church Anglican, who at the time of writing the text was reportedly acting as curate at St Clement Danes, London. His text was written in light of the plague scare which took place in Marseille in 1720, and the consequent fear of a similar epidemic crossing the channel.

The second text, *Heavenly treasures in earthen vessels (HT)*, is a funeral sermon written and originally delivered in 1722 by Jeremiah Smith for his co-pastor of the Silver Street Presbyterian Chapel, London, Samuel Rosewell.² Both writer and deceased subject were dissenting ministers, and the text adheres to the conventions of the eighteenth century Protestant funeral oration, consisting largely of an exegesis of 2 Corinthians 4:7: 'But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us'.³

Both texts are fundamentally concerned with that which remains after death. The term that-which-remains is used here and throughout this article to signify the fact that these texts, and

¹ Thomas Lewis, *Seasonable Considerations on the Indecent and Dangerous Custom of Burying in Churches and Church-yards* (London, 1721), henceforth *SC*.

² Jeremiah Smith, *Heavenly treasures in earthen vessels* (London, 1722), henceforth *HT*.

³ On the generic conventions of the eighteenth century funeral sermon, see Penny Pritchard, 'The Protestant Funeral Sermon in England, 1688–1800', in Keith C Francis et al (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the British sermon, 1689-1901* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 322 – 337.

debates surrounding the dead in the early eighteenth century, conceptualised the human post-mortem in ways that incorporated far more than the physical matter of the body. The precise nature of that-which-remains was a critical and contested consideration in contemporary debates surrounding the resurrection and whether, or how much of, the body was required to join with the soul at the end of days.⁴ Not merely the spiritual value of corporeal matter was at stake, but also the question of what makes man, and whether identity adheres to bodily sameness or, in the post-Lockean theorisation of the separation of man and person, to a continuity of consciousness in the working of memory, which renders the physical body merely matter.⁵ Such debates were also tied to the rise of anatomical dissection and the preservation and display of human remains in cabinets of curiosities and medical museums – trends which suggest a conceptual detachment between living and dead, and a view of the dead body as strictly corporeal.⁶ Yet concurrently, the eighteenth century saw the rise of what has been called the sentimentalisation and individuation of the dead body, becoming the age of the professionalization of the undertaking industry, and of the commodification of burial space, burial manner, and memorialisation.⁷

These issues crossed over into both architecture and public health, with plans for the rebuilding of London following the great fire, and for the construction of new churches, having to deal with the crucial issue of whether to include church-yards in their designs, or if not, where to place new burial sites outside the metropolis.⁸ This question was not merely about space, design, and theology, but public health, since medical thought from the seventeenth century onwards maintained the contagious potential of the effluvia rising from the dead body, and advised that the relocation of burial sites to non-populated areas would be a remedy for the frequent outbreaks of disease plaguing urban populations.⁹

This article considers *SC* and *HT* in relation to two questions. Where and to whom does that-which-remains belong? And how do the texts represent the nature of that-which-remains? The first section will look at the remains' conceptual position in relation to the space of the

⁴ See, for example, Lucia Dacome, 'Resurrecting by Numbers in Eighteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, 193 (November 2006), 73 – 110.

⁵ Fernando Vidal, 'Brains, Bodies, Selves, and Science: Anthropologies of Identity and the Resurrection of the Body', *Critical Enquiry*, 28, 4 (Summer 2002), 930 – 974.

⁶ Simon Chaplin, 'Dissection and Display in Eighteenth-Century London', in Piers Mitchell (ed.), *Anatomical Dissection in Enlightenment England and Beyond* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 95 – 114; Zoe Crossland, 'Acts of estrangement. The post-mortem making of self and other', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 16, 1 (June 2009), 102 – 125.

⁷ Claire Gittings, *Death, burial and the individual in early modern England* (London, 1984), pp. 142 – 146; Claire Gittings, 'Eccentric or enlightened? Unusual burial and commemoration in England, 1689 – 1823', *Mortality*, 12, 4 (November 2007), 321 – 349; Vanessa Harding, 'Burial on the margin: distance and discrimination in early modern London', in Margaret Cox (ed.), *Grave concerns: death and burial in England 1700 to 1850* (York, 1998), pp. 54 - 64; Jolene Zigarovich, 'Preserved Remains: Embalming Practises in Eighteenth-Century England', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 33, 3 (Fall 2009), 65 – 104.

⁸ Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey, *Hawksmoor's London churches: architecture and theology* (Chicago & London, 2000), p. 133; Mark Jenner, 'Death, Decomposition and Dechristianisation? Public Health and Church Burial in Eighteenth-Century England', *The English Historical Review*, 120, 487 (June 2005), 615 – 632.

⁹ Jenner, 'Death, Decomposition and Dechristianisation? Public Health and Church Burial in Eighteenth-Century England'; Richard Mead, *A short discourse concerning pestilential contagion, and the methods to be used to prevent it* (Dublin, 1720).

church, and in relation to the living and the dead. The second will compare the texts on the basis that one, *HT*, sublimates the body, denying its physicality, while the other acts to reinforce the flesh's status as flesh. The article concludes that both texts support arguments that eighteenth century considerations of the dead prefigure what would come to be the modern phenomenological understanding of death and the dead, arguing that they both engage with the phenomenological issue of death as the presencing of an absence, that which Heidegger has called '...the shrine of Nothing... of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences'.¹⁰

THAT-WHICH-REMAINS: WHERE AND TO WHOM?

WHAT OF THE SANCTUARY?

While the eighteenth century saw the slight weakening of the parish's status as the key organisational and conceptual unit of community, in the period during which both texts were written, the parish, with its church standing as literal and symbolic centre, was still the community to which most people considered themselves as belonging.¹¹ The right of burial within the church's space, be it the building itself or its church-yard, was a critical component of this notion of communal belonging. So powerful was it that it became monetised: there was a known hierarchy of spiritual values attached to burial spaces, which translated into the cost of burial dependent upon location.¹² For many, therefore, that-which-remained belonged both to and in the church.

For Thomas Lewis, the body did not belong either to or in the church: the custom of burying in church or church-yard is immediately declaimed as 'indecent and dangerous'.¹³ The heading for each chapter of the text, and a variant title for the text itself, is 'The Sanctuary undefiled', and Lewis spends the bulk of his text citing historical precedent, both ecclesiastical and otherwise, to prove that 'All nations in the world have most religiously preserved the sanctuary, the place of divine worship, from the pollutions of the dead.'¹⁴ This is the basis of Lewis's claims that the practice of church(yard) burial is 'indecent', for it defiles that which God would keep pure. So far from belonging in the church, the dead body here becomes toxic to it, a pollutant both spiritually – for it defies scriptural instruction and is thus an act of profanity – and physically, causing 'pernicious consequences to the living'.¹⁵

In *HT*, the opposite is true, and once more the question of the remains' belonging revolves around the author's use of the word 'sanctuary'. In Smith's sermon, delivered at a burial taking place in Bunhill Fields rather than a parochial church-yard, we are introduced to the word 'sanctuary' on the third page of his preamble. Here, in the second use of the word 'vessel', referring to the body of the departed minister, Smith refines his conceptualisation of

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 2001), p. 176.

¹¹ Vanessa Harding, 'Burial on the margin: distance and discrimination in early modern London', in Margaret Cox (ed.), *Grave concerns: death and burial in England 1700 to 1850* (York, 1998), p. 55.

¹² Harding, 'Burial on the margin: distance and discrimination in early modern London', pp. 62 – 3.

¹³ *SC*, title-page.

¹⁴ *SC*, p. 5.

¹⁵ *SC*, p. 6.

the bodies of ministers into ‘vessels of the sanctuary’.¹⁶ Henceforth, the phrase ‘vessels of the sanctuary’ is used another three times, with ‘vessels of God’s house’ used once.¹⁷ More importantly, we read the further 25 uses of the word ‘vessel[s]’ as an elided version of the expanded phrase. The metaphor, used from the title onwards to characterise that-which-remains of Samuel Rosewell, is one which ascribes a definite sense of belonging: that-which-remains belongs to and in God’s house.

TO WHOM IT MAY BELONG

The antithetical positions over the question of where that-which-remains belongs are partially explained by a consideration of the attitude taken by each text about who the remains belong to. I begin with *HT*, since it may be remarked that regardless of the phrase ‘vessels of the sanctuary’, my argument is undone by the fact that the that-which-remained in this instance was not buried in a church(yard) but in the second of London’s public burial grounds, Bunhill Fields, which was opened in 1665. That this is not the case comes down to the eighteenth century phenomenon of the commodification of burial space based on perceived spiritual value. For most Anglicans, burial inside the church, especially in chancel or chapels, was more desirable and therefore more expensive than in spaces further from these loci of spiritual concentration. Samuel Rosewell was not an Anglican; he was a dissenting minister, and by 1722, Bunhill Fields had become the burial site of choice for London dissenters.¹⁸ Rosewell, therefore, is buried where he would have wished, in the dissenters’ equivalent of the church chancel, and here we arrive at the key notion of belonging in the sense of possession.

The eighteenth century saw the individual take charge of his/her own remains. We see this in the increasing numbers of people who specified their funeral arrangements in their wills, and even who built their own funerary monuments and graves in advance of their own deaths. The rise of the undertaking trade meant that the dead body no longer belonged to those who survived it, but more and more came to belong to the individual whose remains they were yet to be.¹⁹

Lewis’s text takes issue with this development, attacking those who would ‘make their [own] graves’ in the church, seeing this as originating in a kind of autochthonous projection of the imagination fuelled by pride:

The ambitious prelates... could not long see princes entomb’d in churches and themselves and their brethren shut out... but if princes would venture to lye in the porch, they would... venture into the Body of the Church and make their graves at the very altar...²⁰

¹⁶ *HT*, p. 3 (preamble).

¹⁷ *HT*: p. 3 (preamble); 1; 9; 25; 32.

¹⁸ Harding, ‘Burial on the margin: distance and discrimination in early modern London’, p. 61.

¹⁹ Gittings, *Death, burial and the individual in early modern England*, pp. 142 – 146; Claire Gittings, ‘Eccentric or enlightened? Unusual burial and commemoration in England, 1689 – 1823’, 321 – 349.

²⁰ *SC*, p. 42.

To make one's own grave is an act of possession in defiance of time and mortality. It is a making of a grave *for* oneself, but for a self that is not oneself, because a grave with a living man in it, is a hole: a grave is not a grave without remains to fill it. The maker of the grave, as both subject who makes and object to be en-graved, possesses the grave by being at the moment of its construction necessarily both living and dead. This temporal disjuncture, expressed above through the use of the conditional, allowing one to 'see' the funerals of others and the self in the same tense and to tenselessly 'make' one's own grave, shows the emergent sense that one could be present at one's own funeral, possessing and directing one's remains after death. It is this sense of possession which Lewis sees as contributing to the deleterious practice of church burial.

SC is an attempt to repudiate this egocentric death-in-life, suggesting that that-which-remains should neither belong to nor be considered on behalf of the living person whose physical remains they might be. This approach bookends Lewis's treatise: his introduction states that burial is an act of necessity, charitable only to the living whose grief is allayed by the ritual, and whose health is preserved by the burying of rotting corpses.²¹ *SC* ends with an appeal to 'our Governours' to ban church(yard) burial by an act of parliament in order to prevent the spread of disease and the potential of plague arriving from France.²² Lewis's entire work culminates in an appeal to take that-which-remains out of the hands of the autochthonously proud individual or those who still see burial as an act of charity to the dead, and hand it over to the state to ensure the safety of the community.

THE FLESH MADE WORD VERSUS THE FLESH MADE FLESHIER

As a funeral sermon delivered at the graveside of a man who might well have chosen his own burial location, and who was known well by both preacher and congregation, it might be said that *HT* provides evidence of the sentimental individuation of that-which-remains. Meanwhile, *SC*'s concerns for public health and desire to consign that-which-remains to public bodies, can be read as belonging to the objectivity of the natural sciences, advocating detachment equivalent to the donation of bodily remains to the medical museum or curiosity cabinet. A consideration of the manner in which the texts represent the nature of that-which-remains shows that neither text fits so neatly into simple categorisation.

HT immediately detaches the reader/listener from the corporeality and individuality of that-which-remains, sublimating the corpse through the generic scriptural metaphor of the 'earthen vessel'. The sermon then resolutely ignores the physical remains and focuses upon the metaphysical contents of that broken vessel: the word of God in the form of the words, oral and written, of the departed minister: 'tho the vessel be broken, yet the Treasure be not altogether lost... let us gather up the Fragments, all that can be recollected or gotten of his holy instructions and counsels...' ²³

²¹ *SC*, p. 3.

²² *SC*, p. 61.

²³ *HT*, p. 2 (preamble).

This is the first instance, after the title page, of the use of the term ‘vessel’, and we see the immediate displacement of the physical vessel, which might be expected to have fragments that can be collected, by the metaphysical treasure – a treasure consisting of words. Therefore, the sublimation is a textual act that transforms flesh into word; we do not, even at the graveside, need to confront that-which-remains as flesh doomed to rot, but are allowed to experience that-which-remains as incorruptible and edifying.

In the entirety of this sermon, which has as its only subject that-which-remains after death, we hear of the dead body as corpse only once: ‘But the bodies of good men, though they moulder and rot in the grave, will be raised again, glorious and beautiful’.²⁴ The fact that the sentence begins with a negating conjunction and that the mention of decomposition is hedged between parenthetical commas and made subordinate in a sentence whose main clause is to do with the resurrection of the beautiful and incorruptible spiritual body sums up the attitude of Smith’s text to that-which-remains. While the body might perhaps be sentimentalised, it is not individualised, and is certainly detached. The metaphysical transformation of flesh into word, like the physical transformation of flesh into exhibit, allows for the unease of the grave to be dispelled by the marshalling of that-which-remains into something incorruptible, edifying, strictly controlled and comprehensible.

Lewis’s text, meanwhile, though its use of historical precedent and the terminology of contemporary medical science might be said to make the body into an object, represents that-which-remains with unceasing focus on its fleshiness, a fleshiness which remains actively potent in death:

It is an undoubted truth that the corruption of dead bodies interr’d in churches may be communicated to the living, and that many dangerous and fatal distempers may be received from the effluvia of the dead by secret communication, although the stench be not perceived by the nostrils.²⁵

Here we see that-which-remains as the subject of modern medical analysis; the word ‘effluvia’ had only entered the language in 1646. Yet these effluvia are invasive; they are made the subject of the second relative clause, while the living are the object of the first relative clause. When Lewis refers back to the plague of 1665, he writes that ‘the very carcasses when dead would weep out... the morbois ferment both through the cutaneous pores and the lachrymal ducts...’, again combining scientific lexis with the agency of carcasses that can – in what must be described as a sentimental metaphor – weep.²⁶ Further on in the same section, Lewis describes an experiential antagonism between the dead who both can and wish to destroy, and the living whose imaginations are subordinated by a terror arising from this:

...the effluvia from the dead naturally tend to destroy the life of others... that is really the reason men naturally abhor the sight or touch of the dead, the natural spirit of life is afraid of a dead body and has an abhorrence of

²⁴ *HT*, p. 12.

²⁵ *SC*, p. 56.

²⁶ *SC*, p. 55.

it... from this natural fear, humane flesh being dead, seems to be much colder to our touch than any other flesh...²⁷

There is a physical and intellectual proximity between the living and that-which-remains that is far more involuntary and experientially complexified than Smith's conceptualisation of the living collecting the verbal fragments of their deceased minister. Lewis insists repeatedly on a flesh made fleshier, on a that-which-remains rotting, stinking, corrupting and infecting.

CONCLUSION: THE LIVING AS CARRIERS OF THE DEAD

Despite their differences, both *SC* and *HT* tie in to recognisable eighteenth century trends surrounding the discursive and symbolic understandings of death and the body. Vidal has argued that the eighteenth century saw the beginnings of what would become the modern phenomenological approach to death.²⁸ This essay lacks the scope to say whether Vidal's assertion is correct, but does provide evidence that these eighteenth century texts engage conceptually with that-which-remains in ways that can be seen as phenomenological. They are both concerned with giving their readers/listeners an experiential understanding of death. And both engage in a phenomenological conceptualisation of that-which-remains, which figures the living as carriers of the dead.

In *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida writes of the deceased Paul de Man that he leaves thoughts 'alive within us', and this rather simple quotation serves to highlight the unifying phenomenological similarity between *HT* and *SC*.²⁹ Like Lewis's conceptualisation, the living are invaded, penetrated by the dead, carriers of the dead. Smith also makes the living carriers of the dead, where he imagines the living gathering up the fragments of treasure which remain: his living are gleaners as well as carriers. In one sense, Derrida's living are carriers more in the sense of Lewis's: that-which-remains is alive and active, and penetrates the innermost reaches of the living, rather than remaining external. Yet like Smith's conceptualisation, that-which-remains is metaphysical, ideas which are of value to the living, rather than the primarily physical corruption carried by the living as a result of that-which-remains in *SC*.

Of course, Derrida's conceptualisation differs from both eighteenth century approaches: his that-which-remains is a flesh made idea, rather than a flesh made word or a flesh made fleshier. de Man leaves behind his own ideas, ideas that are carried subjectively rather than being objectively accessible as scripture. Equally, the invasion is not physical or contagious, but intellectual and individually circumscribed. Neither Lewis nor Smith were or could have been post-modern humanists, as we might term Derrida. But their engagement with that-which-remains can be seen as having more in common with the twentieth century phenomenologist than might be assumed.

²⁷ *SC*, p. 55.

²⁸ Vidal, 'Brains, Bodies, Selves, and Science: Anthropologies of Identity and the Resurrection of the Body', p. 936.

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds. Anne-Pascale Brault & Michael Naas (Chicago & London, 2001), p. 73.

Perhaps that is inevitable in any writing about that-which-remains. Heidegger wrote that mortals ‘are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death as death... Death is the shrine of Nothing... of that which in every respect is never something that merely exists, but which nevertheless presences.’³⁰ Meanwhile Derrida remarks upon how death forces one to speak *of* rather than to speak *with*.³¹ Speaking *of* something is exactly what both these texts do, just as it is precisely the presencing of an absence: to speak of something which is no longer there is to bring into presence the absence of the object. It is to render that-which-remains an object which cannot presence itself any longer.

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³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 2001), p. 176.

³¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, Eds. Anne-Pascale Brault & Michael Naas (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 72.

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