

## R. I. P.

Joyce Burstein's *the epitaph project*

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Sometimes when I pass some old green-overgrown country graveyard in the Hudson Valley I like to imagine holy beggars camping in it. In India I spent (or wasted) a good deal of time with dervishes and saddhus, Moslem and Hindu holy men who dress in rags and wander from shrine to shrine, sleeping out in graveyards or cremation grounds. Christianity had spiritual tramps like these in the Middle Ages: pilgrims, pardoners, Beghards and Beguines, Franciscan bums. But Reformation and Counter-Reformation reforms killed off the holy unemployed in the West, or drove them into seclusion.

In later centuries a few bold spirits tried to re-invent such a life: the 17<sup>th</sup> century Rosicrucians at least dreamed of it, and in 19<sup>th</sup> century America we had Jonathan Chapman



(“Johnny Appleseed”), itinerant Swedenborgian missionary and guerrilla gardener — types of the “Cherubic Wanderer”. But no sects or cults sprang up around these lone and poetic figures. No Swedenborgian hobos roam the modern Midwest, and no hippy holy fools are camping in Upstate New York graveyards.

Medieval Moslems believed that the Egyptian pyramids were the grain elevators of Pharaoh; modern pyramidologists have seen them as astronomical observatories or even UFO landing sites — but whatever else they may be, they’re also the world’s largest tombstones. Paracelsus and the Rosicrucian alchemists were fascinated with a drug called *Mumia*, literally the boiled-down essence of Egyptian mummies, looted from tombs and pyramids by the shipload. Paracelsus speaks of a *spiritual* mumia; he seems to envision it as an Invisible fluid, rather like the *baraka* or “blessing” that flows from the tombs of certain sufi saints or martyrs, and especially from the tomb of the Prophet. Spiritual mumia may appear as a kind of flowery remembrance of the saintly dead, almost present, almost palpable, the positive Dead so to speak. In Voodoo and Hoodoo, graveyard dirt or *gris-gris* takes on this potent but ambiguous magic — which can turn necromantic, dark and malicious in the realm of the negative Dead — the ungrateful Dead. And every graveyard possesses at least some atmosphere of mumia, at least a hint of some scent of gris-gris.

Armenians hold picnics in graveyards on the death anniversaries of loved ones, or on the Spring Equinox. Sufism has retained a similar custom once also widespread in the Christian West, happy pilgrimage to the tombs of saints. Extremely ancient practices of dream incubation and psychic healing are easily syncretized with the cults of saints, whose graves may grant anything from fertility to mystical insight or even initiation. Sufis celebrate the *‘urs* or death anniversary — but the word literally means “wedding”: a joyful occasion with music, ecstatic dance, free food, the pleasures of Carnival, the acquisition of *baraka*.

In the West certain Cathedral closes, churchyards and shrines were considered sanctuaries where criminals could seek and find refuge from prosecution and live off the charity of pilgrims. The secular State soon put an end to this custom, but when I traveled in Afghanistan in the 1970s certain sufi shrines were still held as *bast* or sanctuaries. Outside Herat I visited (by horse drawn droshky) the tomb of Abdallah Ansari, a great 11th century saint and sufi poet. His tombstone is carved from a block of marble with calligraphy delicate as icing on a wedding cake. The tomb is enclosed by a wall, and inside the wall a number of ragged long bearded and rather desperate-looking men were living and waiting hungrily for alms. A few cypresses for shade, views of distant mountains and unpolluted sky (not even electric light dirtied the night sky of Afghanistan) — the refugees led a



narrow life, but at least it was life; and the hospitality of a dead saint is far better than that of an angry or corrupt judge. Ansari's "ghost" protected them — but also kept them out of mischief as effectively as any prison.

Herat is said to have 500 sufi shrines, and I visited only a few; but I noticed there and elsewhere that each tomb I visited somehow expressed the *personality* of the dead saint. At some the pilgrims could do nothing but weep; at others there was wild dancing, transvestite dervishes, hashish. Some were massed with flowers, rosy with incense, ringing with music — others were pious, somber, or aristocratically aloof. And so on. At the tomb of Hafez, the greatest poet of Shiraz, in the midst of a rose garden set with fountains, pilgrims come to open his book of poems at random to tell their fortune — as if this poet of wine and love were almost a prophet, a combination of Lovelace, Suckling, John Donne and Nostradamus.

Holy wanderers sometimes hang around graveyards simply for the peace and quiet, the cool shade. Once in India in the pilgrim city of Benares I had no money for even the cheapest hotel. My friend James and I spent every day looking for some refuge from the noise and burning heat of the city. One day in a baking suburb we passed a garden gate. It was open; no one was there; we peeped inside; no one there; we stepped in and called out but no one answered. A little "tank" of water and lily pads, some shade trees, green grass.

But no one. Not a single person to be seen. Wondering greatly we stretched out on the lawn and snoozed the afternoon away. Next day we returned. Now there was a gate-keeper, an old and merry gent who said, "I always leave the gate open when I'm away so people can come in and rest. You're very welcome."

"But all the day we spent here no one else came in. Surely that's unusual in a crowded city like this? And no one else is here today. Why?"

The gatekeeper roared with laughter. "This is the garden of the Aghoris. Everyone else is *afraid* to come here. They think we are ghouls and ghosts! Ha ha ha!"

The Aghoris are an extremist sect of saddhus who roam around naked carrying their food in human skull bowls and scaring themselves with ash from cremation grounds. They meditate seated on corpses and even eat human flesh. Great practitioners of tantrik magic, they use huge doses of dangerous hallucinogens and live in graveyards and leprosariums. (See *Aghora: The Left Hand of God*, R. Svoboda, Shambhala Press.) As for me, I've always retained a soft spot in my heart for those ghouls and the priceless peace and quiet of their garden.

In Calcutta (where we were reduced to sleeping in a rat-crawling courtyard) the search for elusive peace-and-quiet took us to the "Old Burial Ground" at South Park Street, the old Raj-era English cemetery, where many of the tombs are



full scale mausoleums in true Victorian- Mughal style, and the whole vast cemetery run down, crumbling, infested with unruly Indian vines and weeds, empty of life (no dervishes and saddhus) like a necropolis from some Gothic novel. A tombstone reads, "Lieut. So-and-so, aged 20, killed by a tiger." Another mourns a young lady who died of a "surfeit of pineapples".

The vast suburban or "rural" cemeteries of the 19th century, especially in England and America, were meant to replace outmoded and overcrowded churchyards of the older cities. Neglected churchyards, complete, with the odd mossy skull or broken bone-strewn catafalque, bred pestilence (or so the moral hygienists believed) and reduced Death to a folly of medieval filth and superstition. (See Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*.) Death demanded Reform, just like Life; death needed *improvement*. Many pioneers of the Rural Cemetery Movement were Freemasons, and the Victorian cemetery took on a powerful aura of masonic mystery. Antiquity was combed for the typical pre-Post-Modern Victorian bouillabaisse of death art: Baroque, Gothic, Egyptian as well as Greco-Roman; the "colonies" provided inspiration; Sir Richard Burton was buried at Highgate under a Bedouin tent carved of marble. The graveyard was transformed into an Emblem-Book of Death, a Freemasonic *Book of the Dead*. It became a kind of performance space as well, in which incredible rites of mourning and *pompes funebres*

were staged complete with professional "Mutes" in tall top hats hung with ribbons of black crepe. "Full mourning" could last a year or more, and required a whole new wardrobe in black, including funeral jewelry of jet and onyx woven with braids of loved-ones' hair.

The funeral procession, shiny black & glass-sided hearse dripping with melancholy flowers and ostrich plumes, drawn by six black horses; the fervid sentimentality of the carved weeping angels and delicate dead children already white as marble ghosts, sleeping eternally on marble beds; and so on; —in our time all of this has shifted meaning, the cemeteries themselves are now often neglected and decaying in their turn; the Victorian death cult seems merely embarrassing or campy in our enlightened age. We shunt death into hospitals and medicalize it; we cremate and throw the ashes into the ocean, or shoot them via rocket into outer space; we freeze the brain and hope for literal immortality; new tombstones are equipped with video screens so that family ghosts can be called up and exorcized at the push of a button; we have cyber- cemeteries — and in fact the whole Internet is a kind of haunted slum (as William Gibson predicted) where death itself becomes virtual, an image of itself, a pallid representation. And our fascination with the *image* of death hides from us the fact that we have become a culture of extreme *death-avoidance*. We've even invented the "war without casualties".



The cult of death, the intensity of (say) the Mexican Day of the Dead, must always give way to the onslaught of progress and enlightenment and late capitalism. The kings of Nubia disappeared beneath the dammed Nile in Upper Egypt, and eighteen rural graveyards vanished under the Ashokan Reservoir here in Ulster Co., NY. (All the skeletons however were dug up and reburied.) Many rural graveyards, inner city churchyards, even the suburban cemeteries that were still thriving when I was young, now have fallen into the inevitable meltdown of fashion. Graveyards fill up, relatives move away, plot-rents aren't paid, the church folds, the government needs a new highway. Death itself seems to grow old.

The discovery of little country graveyards and weed-choked family plots offers the amateur a taste of the archeological thrill, the sheer rush that must've overwhelmed Schliemann in Troy, Wooley in Ur or Stronach with the Achaemenid royal burials. (Actually I knew Stronach in Iran, and he was always very modest about his "luck".) I've felt flashes of this same high in Ireland, locating obscure megaliths, such as the "tombs" of Finn M'cool or Nuada Silverhand; a process that usually involves meeting strange farmers in pubs and drinking with them ("informants"), getting lost despite the detailed directions given by the strange farmers, getting wet and muddy — and blissed out. Looking for Effigy Mounds in Wisconsin (some of them are tombs,

as are some Irish megaliths) offers the lure of possible real discoveries: two friends of mine discovered a "new" Eagle mound near Muscodah. Country graveyards generally offer milder — but related — pleasures.

New England graveyards are older and more gothic than most Upstate New York ones; books of charcoal rubbings of gravestones have made Puritan death art well known and rightfully admired for its primitive and unabashed morbidity. The *memento mori* or artistic reminder of death here achieves a ghastly beauty that already seemed quaint and eerie to Hawthorne, Poe, or Lovecraft. But our local NY graveyards (Dutch, Huguenot, African-American, etc.) at least have the intense charm of obscurity, unfamousness, neglect, sadness and even disappearance.

I'm fond of the Snyder graveyard near High Falls with its Revolutionary War veterans, cement miners, old gentry, and victims of the Eugenics Movement: a number of families called by a made-up name, the Jukes, involuntary subjects of books about crime and "bad heredity" (in 1876 and 1915). Many of these Jukes ended their careers of poaching and incest in the Ulster Co. Poorhouse — but the Poorhouse itself vanished completely about 25 years ago. The land is now a park with pool and County Fairgrounds. Last year some local historians discovered the forgotten site of the Poorhouse potter's field or paupers' graveyard. One large



stone lay face down, so that its epitaph could still be easily deciphered:

In Memory of Rebekah Maclane (?)  
...died May 3, 1862, aged 30 years, 3 months, 7 days

WHO' LL WEEP FOR ME?

Wher' neath the cold damp earth I lay  
And sleep in quiet day by day  
And have no more on earth to say

WHO' LL WEEP FOR ME?

When I am sleeping in the tomb  
Ando'er my head fair flowers bloom  
Or midnight's showers in her gloom

WHO' LL WEEP FOR ME?

Yes others too will weep for me  
As here I sleep beneath this tree  
That waves its branches over me

THEY TOO WILL WEEP FOR ME

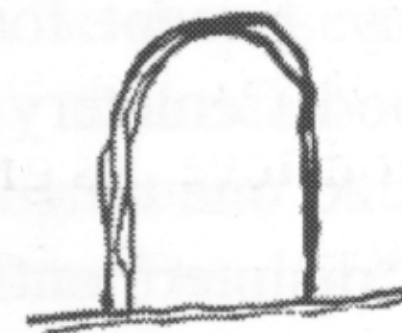
My mother dear — I know she'll weep  
And father too while here I sleep  
My brothers and my sisters dear  
Will weep for me while I lay here

Rebekah was held in the Poorhouse for "insanity"; but someone cared enough to pay for a fairly elaborate gravestone. The epitaph-poem's grammatical errors suggest that it was not copied from a book but perhaps written by an itinerant epitaph-writing poet. I believe such people existed although I presume they worked at other things besides poetry to earn their keep.

One of the most beautiful churches in Delaware Co. is the Old Baptist "Yellow Church" In Roxbury — simple and severe as a Shaker barn or Zen teahouse — no electricity or plumbing, heated by woodstove. Its graveyard ranks high for browsing, the most famous stone being that of an infant "spurred to death by a rooster".

The writer David Levi Strauss suggested to me in conversation that the "first" writing, in Sumer or Egypt, might not have been commercial but funereal: — an epitaph. It's an intriguing notion, although I don't know of any direct evidence for it. Certainly the earliest epitaphs we've found are very early indeed: fulsome praises of the dead kings of Ur, or the Pyramid Texts of Egypt's First Dynasty. The combination of image and text belongs to the realm of magic from its very first appearance to the latest advert or propaganda piece on TV. The image by itself remains open to myriad interpretations, while text by itself lacks resonance with the unconscious — but together they reach both brain and heart: the caption ideologizes the image, as Walter Benjamin pointed out. Sumerian and Egyptian writing was pictographic, i.e., it already combined both word and image, like a rebus. Writing allowed the scribe to effect action at a distance — the essence of magic. Writing was obviously a good way to extol and control the Dead with a single gesture. The tombstone is a book of necromancy. Writing *per se* is involved with death.

Even an unadorned gravestone such as a *menhir* functions as a memento mori or image of death. If I make a hieroglyph:





some readers may guess what it “says”. But if I add a caption — an epitaph — the grave becomes more than an image. It is now an Emblem, an image-with-words:



No one in our culture can mistake the meaning of this potent Emblem, even though that meaning evades any precise definition and flows out into various other fields and bogs of meaning. Eventually however it may happen that the meaning of meaning itself shifts and mutates.

Jessica Mitford's *American Way of Death* chronicled an era in the history of death that was summed up and satirized with Juvenalesque hilarity and nausea by Evelyn Waugh in *The Loved One*, which in turn became a great movie (with the strange TV pianist Liberace playing a queer undertaker, etc.). The cemetery featured in both these works, the Hollywood Cemetery where Joyce Burstein launched *the epitaph project*, declined from its peak of grace in the 1950s. It fell on days of decay. Except for the grave of Rudolf Valentine, the Hollywood Cemetery seemed to have been abandoned by meaning. At one time its owners earned most of their money from “disinterments”— digging up your

loved ones and moving them to more fashionable or meaningful addresses. The current owners however have sparked a revival by introducing new concepts — such as video tombstones — or Joyce Burstein's project. In less adventurous areas however death sometimes seems to become a kind of vacuum; by contrast the sufi *'urs* or Victorian *pompes funebres* present death as a plenum: multiple meanings overwritten in a palimpsest or even a delirium of emblematic significances.

Our local paper has been running a story about graveyard desecration in a semi-abandoned cemetery. Unusually the culprits were actually caught: drunk teens trying to impress their girlfriends; admitted they “did it for kicks”. Everyone knows that one of the secrets of the graveyard is its outsideness, which makes it a place of transgression (like the Aghoris on their corpse-seats) and even of dark sexuality. It won't be long before some expert or authority suggests banning graveyards altogether.

Will graves and epitaphs disappear? It's not simply a matter of some Malthusian population explosion of the Dead — although it's true that half the people who ever lived on Earth are alive *now* — and eventually will die and need to be buried or otherwise disposed of and remembered or forgotten. But a society that deals with the presence of the Dead simply by ignoring them (“cutting them dead”) seems difficult to imagine. If the Dead are not in some place then



they will not rest in peace: — ghosts are real enough in the nocturnal unconscious, in dreams, in the unanalyzed complex of everyday life, even if they've been banished from our enlightened and rationalistic daytime consciousness. "Bad luck" arises out of bad relations with the Dead. The graveyard will have to be re-imagined somehow. The epitaph will still need to be written.

— Peter Lamborn Wilson July 2003

