

Introduction

THE WORK OF THE DEAD

[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. I.1).

This book is about the body, about the disenchanting 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.



1.1. Diogenes investigates a tomb. Jonas Umbach, 1645–1700. British Museum.

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 nutriment 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 carnage 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, "hadde 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 a way 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 he tells her that when he dies they will be together again: "Time will console you. The dead are nothing." The body has always been disenchanting.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 disenchanting, it has also always been enchanting: 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 1). 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 1) 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 Annalists 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 1 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 a sign that read, “Moved from Nigger Hill Cemetery” over the new graves of 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



I.2. *Office of the Dead, the Grandes Heures de Rohan*. MS Latin 9471. Bibliotheque Nationale de France, 1425–1430.



I.3. The body of a U.S. soldier in Mogadishu, 1993. Jim Watson. *Toronto Star*.

things to be represented as speaking, as well as hearing” (fig. I.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.⁶

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.⁷

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. I.3, I.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



I.4. Achilles drags the body of Hector.
Diosphos painter, vase, ca. 490 B.C.E.
Louvre, Paris.

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.⁸

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' 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 order to live. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being."⁹

I also believe that there is an even more fundamental reason why our species lives with, and cares for, its dead, materially and imaginatively: such attention is *a*, if not *the*, sign of our emergence from the order of nature into culture. It is, as the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, "the immutable anthropological background for all the human and social changes, past or present." The burial of the dead

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

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.¹⁰

Gadamer's use of the phrase "elementary significance" puts me in mind of Claude Lévi-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.¹¹

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,

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.¹²

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: smelly, 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 redistribution 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 rewoven 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 I 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.”¹³

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

infinitely varied, that we shape into an engagement with the past and the present. That said, 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 Diogenes 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 recognizably 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 *praesentia*, 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 Ariès, 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. (Ariès 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.¹⁵

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 disenchanting 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. Amidst 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, neo-classical, 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, flutters 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

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 massive post-Franco exhumations, Lorca has a point. But although league standings change over time, the dead are alive everywhere. (In late November 2014, Spanish 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 historian 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 disenchanting. 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 foundational anthropological claims with which I began are still at work in the unlikely 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 generally 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 Federation, 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 Krasim, 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 November, 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 persuasions particularly of the younger element of the 'Right wing,'" said the commissioner 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 gravesites 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; "Claudia 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



I.5. The grave of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, London.



I.6. The grave of Eric Hobsbawm in Highgate Cemetery, London.

stones in front of tombs so that the dead would stay in place (figs. I.5, I.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

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

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 surround 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 Béla Bartók 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 Otiena, 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 Otiena’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. I.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 gravestones 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 Wrocław, 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 rabbi’s tombstone is remarkable. It sat in the



1.7. The grave of the rabbi, David ben Elizer, the author's great-great-great-great-grandfather, in Mjiesce, Poland.



1.8. The grave of Anna and Siegfried Laqueur, the author's great-grandparents, in Wrocław, Poland.

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.²⁸

I came upon my great-grandparents' graves by accident when my wife and I toured the German Jewish cemetery in Wrocław (fig. 1.8). There is an irony in the fact that a Jewish burial place is one of the very few public signs in Wrocław 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. I.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. I.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. His sister's, my Tante Elli'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



I.9. The grave of Walther Laqueur, Dr. med., the author's grandfather, in Friedhof Ohlsdorf, Hamburg.



I.10. Flowerbed on Claytor Lake, near Pulaski, Virginia, where the ashes of Werner and Toni Laqueur, the author's parents, and Elli Lauquer Silton, the author's aunt, are scattered.

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. It has always taken a leap to make something, but not too

much, of corpses. (The past must not bury the future.) I believe that the power of the dead has always worked and still does by sleight of hand, but of a profound sort. This is what I meant when I wrote earlier that this book is written under the sway of anthropology informed, in the moment, by history.

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.”²⁹

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.