American Gravestones and Attitudes Toward Death:

A Brief History

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Among students of American culture, death has become almost a fad. Philippe Ariès's big book *L'Homme devant la mort* is now available in translation and in paperback; the "American way of death," exposed by Jessica Mitford in 1963, has been re-exposed, reinterpreted, and traced back to its invention; two recent books have examined death in Puritan New England; *American Quarterly* has devoted an entire issue to death; and there is even a journal, aptly named *Omega*, whose every article examines the subject. This investigation of death is medical and sociological, not religious. What attracts scholars are attitudes toward death: the pain, horror, worry, hope, joy, sadness, relief, or indifference of the dying; the grief or serenity of those who survive. There is not much scholarly inquiry into the actual condition of the dead—*l'homme après la mort*. That condition continues to be a taboo subject, a can of worms best left to the people who traffic in faith.¹

Along with the study of attitudes toward death has come an intensive study of American gravestone carving. The last two decades have witnessed the publication of works on the subject by Frederick Burgess (on English stones), Allan Ludwig, Edwin Dethlefsen and James Deetz, Emily Wasserman, Dickran and Ann Tashjian, and Peter Benes; plus the writing of dissertations and theses. The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife has published the proceedings of two meetings devoted to Puritan gravestone art, and the Association for Gravestone Studies has held annual conventions.²

It is not entirely fortuitous that death studies and gravestone studies have burgeoned at the same time. The decoration, inscription, location, and plentitude of gravestones have been assumed to reflect the attitudes of the people who built them, including their attitudes toward death. Under this assumption, scholars who have wanted to learn about attitudes toward death have gone to look at gravestones, while scholars who have wanted to learn about gravestones have borrowed books about attitudes toward death. Examination of the one has revealed the other, with the synergistic result that facts and ideas about death and gravestones have exploded into existence like popcorn. What may be useful now is to gather up much of this scattered information and assemble it on a string of chronology that stretches from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. This essay is such an attempt.

But first some warnings about methodology. As this essay may demonstrate, interpreting gravestones is not as easy as it seems. Gravestone carvers and purchasers, unlike makers and buyers in more esteemed arts such as painting and architecture, almost never explained their commodity. They
left behind virtually no written record of their motives or intentions, no explanation of why they carved or ordered a particular design. Only in rare cases, such as that of the Stevens family in Newport, did carvers produce literary evidence which reveals even their general outlook on life and death. Thus, although the people involved in creating gravestones were not entirely inarticulate, they did not express themselves as clearly as one might wish. Consequently, when one attempts to interpret gravestones, one must rely on sources of information extraneous to the stones themselves: writings produced at the same time as the carvings, though by different hands; aesthetic or anthropological theory which purports to illuminate human behavior at any time; or one's own sensibility and imagination, which respond to the silent stone. None of these extraneous sources of information, however, is entirely dependable and beyond the reach of revisionism. Therefore, one finds oneself interpreting a gravestone by fitting it into interpretations derived from other sources, but then using the resulting gravestone interpretation to revise the others. Thus one whirls round and round in the hermeneutic circle—a procedure which does not inspire confidence. Stuart Piggott has informed archaeologists that mortuary artifacts are "the product of complex mental situations and emotional states now irrecoverable"; while Lance R. Mayer has explored everyone not to commit the sin of "Panofskyism," that is, "assigning to works of art elaborate meanings for which there may be very little support." Thus warned, the gravestone interpreter is always aware that his explanations are tentative, approximate, and subject to doubt. 

Erwin Panofsky, who was (as Mayer points out) no slouch at offering bold interpretations, nevertheless issued another very useful warning: there is no reason to assume that any decoration is "uniquely determined." This is something to keep in mind when interpreting gravestones. A motif may have more than one motive, just as two roads, though running in different directions, may end up at the same place. For example, a carver may etch flowers onto a gravestone because he thinks they symbolize resurrection, or because he thinks they're pretty, or because he knows that everybody else is carving flowers, or for a combination of those reasons. Moreover, even at the single and rarefied level of symbolism, a symbol can mean several different things. A flower may represent not only the promise of immortality, but also the poignant, brief beauty of a human life. According to Faye J. Baker, symbols are not "denotative," in one-to-one relationship with ideas, but "connotative," indicating only "a general attitude or feeling." I believe, however, that symbols are even more mysterious than that: they may indicate several general attitudes or feelings. All of this suggests that art history is not a subdivision of algebra, and that people seeking certainty and simplicity had better look for them elsewhere. 

A final problem with gravestone studies is geographical malapportionment. Not much information about American gravestones outside of the Northeast, especially New England, is readily available. I myself have photographed stones in no place more exotic than Ithaca, New York; and, to the best of my knowledge, no explorer has ever brought back reports of gravemarkers in Oregon. Despite recent studies of cemeteries in Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia, much of the country remains terra incognita. Therefore, when I mention "American" gravestone carving, I am likely to be equating six or seven states with America. If such an equation provokes objection, at least it ought to stimulate research and publication on the stones of hitherto neglected regions. Moreover, this seemingly reckless extrapolation may not prove fatal to my argument. After comparing colonial northeastern and southeastern gravestones, Frederick Gor-
man and Michael DiBlasi have concluded that there was a single Euro-American tradition of carving; and David Hall has suggested that “Puritan” gravestones reflect no specific religion but only “a moral tradition which we can simply say is Western.” If these scholars are right, and if Americans did not secede from Western culture after 1776, then my generalizations based on only a few states may be valid for all states and even, to some extent, for Europe.\(^8\)

I divide American gravestones into six basic styles, flourishing in six overlapping periods, and reflecting six different attitudes toward death. In short:

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Of course, so simple a schema is bound to crunch nuances, ignore exceptions, obscure countervailing tendencies, and convey a misleading impression of cultural uniformity. But that is the price one pays for historical generalization.\(^8\)

The first style of gravestone carving, the Plain Style, is hardly a style at all. It consists of minimal inscription—not much more than names, dates, and an introductory “Here lies”; and little or no decoration—at most a few figures of simple geometry (Fig. 1). The Plain Style predominates in the earliest phase of English colonization, begins losing favor in the late seventeenth century, but never (unlike some of its successors) falls entirely into disuse. Of all the styles of funerary art, it, because of its plainness, is the most difficult to understand. Words may be ambiguous, but silences are even worse.

The most obvious explanation for the Plain Style is one that has nothing to do with attitudes toward death: the Plain Style flourished in the early colonial period be-

![Gravestone of William Paddy, Boston, 1658.](image)
cause the colonists were short of tools, skills, and wealth. Many Plain Style stones are so imperfectly executed as to suggest that an ornate design was beyond the carver’s ability (Fig. 2). Moreover, even if a carver could produce fine and elaborate stones, or even if they were available from some other town or continent, they would be too expensive for some colonists. Hence the Plain Style was in large measure the result of technical and fiscal constraints. The fact that primitive conditions produced artless gravestones helps to explain why the Plain Style, though going into decline as the colonies matured, nevertheless lasted beyond the seventeenth century. As the frontier moved west, so did undecorated stones. The oldest extant stones in Ithaca, New York, date from the early nineteenth century but are specimens of the Plain Style. In cases like this, the Plain Style consists of the absence of style.

But not every case is like this. Often one finds plain but well-lettered stones adjacent to decorated stones from the same period, showing that tools and craftsmen were available; and it is hard to believe that in every such instance the Plain Style was dictated by the lack of a few extra shillings for elegance. It seems that in addition to technical difficulties there were other forces working to keep gravestones plain.

Two of these forces were ideas—not about death, exactly, but about human beings and human bodies. The first idea was that in comparison to God, man was a piece of valiant dust. The Massachusetts minister Uriah Oakes acknowledged “what a poor dependent, nothing-creature proud man is,” and Captain John Smith of Virginia called himself a “miserable sinner.” Seventeenth-century examples of humility such as this could be multiplied indefinitely, and probably were. Given the pervasiveness of this sentiment, it is likely that some colonists chose gravestones which, by their lack of adornment, emphasized the humble status of humankind. The Plain Style was, among other things, an expression of meekness.

Another idea behind the Plain Style was the theological tenet that what is important in a human being is not the body, but the soul; that once the soul has departed, the body is trivial. In colonial graveyards one of the most common epitaphs began, “Here lies the body of. . . .” By accounting specifically and solely for the body of the deceased, the inscription raised the question of the whereabouts of the soul—a question whose importance overshadowed the fact that the location of the corpse was known. Through its plainness the stone asserted that people’s physical remains were of little importance, unworthy of conspicuous commemoration. If one wonders why, then, the colonists bothered to erect any stone at all, one may notice that usually they didn’t. Although gravestones were more common in the colonies than in Europe, it is likely that only a minority of colonists (even in New England) had their burial places marked by carved stones. Most colonial
graves, especially before 1660 but even thereafter, seem to have been marked only by a wooden sign, an uncut rock, or nothing at all.9

Thus far, I have suggested three causes of the Plain Style, none of which is, strictly speaking, an attitude toward death. When at last I come to the point, I note that the attitude which I am about to suggest is not the sole cause, probably not the main cause, but merely a cause.

I suspect that Philippe Ariès is right; that from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period, many Europeans (including European colonists in America) had a calm, resigned, almost absent-minded attitude toward death. They viewed natural death (as opposed to sudden, violent death) as an ordinary, unremarkable aspect of the human condition. Despite the existence of a theology which promised heaven and threatened hell, people accepted death placidly, as if it were sleep. And like sleep, it was a mixed blessing at best. On the one hand, death brought relief from infirmity, sickness, suffering; so people welcomed it. On the other hand, it ended enjoyment of the delights of this world; so people greeted it with sadness, consoling themselves with old maxims about there being a season for everything, including a time to die. Medieval Europeans displayed, says Ariès, “a very old, very durable, very massive sentiment of familiarity with death, with neither fear nor despair, half-way between passive resignation and mystical trust.” When their time came, they just shut their eyes, or rolled themselves over, and died—going out quietly as a candle.10

Insofar as American colonists possessed this “traditional” attitude toward death, they were likely to build Plain Style gravestones. Feeling no particular elation or trepidation over death, the carvers and their customers saw no reason to call attention to the everyday fact that somebody was dead. Therefore, ornament and elaborate inscription had no place. Indeed the grave-markers itself was not entirely necessary: this is another reason for the absence of gravestones in Europe and America. What could better reflect a resigned acceptance of death than this failure to leave a protest carved in stone?

The second major gravestone style—and one somewhat simpler to interpret—is the Death’s Head. Strictly speaking (according, that is, to the Oxford English Dictionary), the Death’s Head is a human skull, symbolizing mortality (Fig. 3). In the literature of American gravestone studies, however, the term Death’s Head has acquired a somewhat different meaning, namely, a skull flanked by extended wings (Fig. 4). This alteration of definition has led to some confusion. Peter Benes has argued that the so-called Death’s Head does not actually represent death, but rather the spirit or ghost liberated from a dead body—an interpretation which would not be possible if the skull was shorn of its wings and brought back to earth.11

The wings make Benes’s thesis possible, but they do not make it tenable. Gravestone carvings in Europe and America provide overwhelming evidence that the skull, even when airborne, does indeed represent death. The skull, it should be remembered, is a head, a synecdoche for the entire skeleton; and no one denies that the skeleton (frequently holding in its hands such significant paraphernalia as a scythe, a shovel, or a cap for extinguishing candles) symbolizes death (Fig. 5). Often, though not always, this skeleton has wings, suggesting that death is an angel, a divine messenger, and that death comes down upon one swiftly and suddenly like a bird of prey. But just as the skeleton can be abbreviated to the form of a skull, so a winged skeleton can be abbreviated to a winged skull—a reduction which began in Europe in the sixteenth century.12 This shorthand image, the winged Death’s Head, is very convenient for gravestone cutters.
Like the ordinary skull, it is easier to carve than a whole set of bones, and it takes up less room. What makes it even more useful than the ordinary skull, however, is that its outstretched wings fill the tympanum, the rounded arch at the top of the stone, with a single powerful image; whereas a wingless skull must either be escorted by such corollary but distracting emblems as hourglasses and crossed bones, or surrounded
by ineffectual air. The winged skull, spanning the stone with a fearful symmetry, unifies the entire design; whereas the wingless skull allows the design to disintegrate into a mere assortment of figures. Thus, when a gravestone carver puts wings on a skull, he does so for one or more reasons: at the intellectual level, to suggest that the angel of death arrives in fell swoops; at the aesthetic level, to unify the visual design. It is doubtful that he means to portray, as Benes maintains, a spirit flapping free from the flesh. The Boston stone of 1678, pictured on p. 68 of Benes’s book, features a winged skull with an hourglass perched on its cranium. Flanking the glass are the words FUGIT and HORA; and above everything arcs the inscription MEMENTO MORI. It is not a ghost that we are enjoined to remember. The Death’s Head lives up to its name. The skull, with or without wings, carried a single message; and it was a message that everyone understood, whether he wanted to or not. When Doll Tearsheet urged Sir John Falstaff to quit fighting and fornicating and instead to patch up his body for heaven, Fat Jack replied, “Peace, good Doll! Do not speak like a death’s head. Do not bid me remember mine end.” Almost a century later, and with a rather different point of view, Cotton Mather explained and praised John Endicott’s practice of sealing each letter
he sent with a wax imprint in the shape of a skull. "That Man is like to die comfortably who is every Day minding himself, that he is to die shortly," said the preacher. "Let us look upon every thing as a sort of Death's Head set before us, with a Memento mortis written upon it." If gravestones are any indication, American colonists of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries followed Mather's advice more than Falstaff's. The Death's Head became common in the 1670s, dominated the graveyard for half a century, and persisted as a common theme almost to the Revolution. The colonists knew, as the church father Irenaeus had said in the second century, that "the business of the Christian is nothing else than to be ever preparing for death." Gravestones helped them to keep death in mind.13

But if the skull reminded Americans of the great, ultimate, and universal fact, there remains the question of how they responded to that fact—what was their attitude toward death? Here, alas, the answer has been obscured by a quarrel among scholars; a quarrel, however, which does not always rise to the level of disagreement.

Allan Ludwig started things off. He pointed out that the Puritans (the literature focuses on New England) dreaded the "horror" and "terrors" of death; and he quoted Samuel Willard's observation that death, "makes a Separation between the soul and body. This is the very nature of it, and is in itself a misery; and for that reason the Godly themselves have a natural reluctance against it: they would not pass through it if they could go to heaven without it." While noting death's repellency, however, Ludwig also noted its attractiveness—at least to the "Godly" Puritans. People like Edward Taylor said that the Lord, by granting grace to sinful man and promising eternal life in heaven, had washed away the dread of death. As Ludwig says in the flourish which ends one section of a chapter, "The fear of death gave way to the thrill of spiritual pleasures yet to come as archangels trumpeted the glorious day."14

Those trumpets were a big mistake. David Stannard, deafened by them, had trouble hearing Ludwig's comments on the unease and horror with which Puritans confronted death. Consequently, in an article and again in a book, Stannard reported that Ludwig had created the "general impression" that Puritans faced death "optimistically, with neither doubts nor fears." Stannard then tried to give a truer, more balanced impression. On the one hand, he said, Puritans happily viewed death as the gateway to heaven. On the other hand, they glumly viewed it as a punishment for sin and as a terrible calamity; being convinced of their wickedness and uncertain of receiving divine mercy, they trembled before the prospect of eternity in hell. While trying to depict the Puritans' ambivalence, however, Stannard nevertheless obscured it. In a lapse which would later be used repeatedly against him, Stannard said that "the Puritans were gripped individually and collectively by an intense and unremitting fear of death, while simultaneously clinging to the traditional Christian rhetoric of viewing death as a release and relief for the earth-bound soul." By saying that fear was "unremitting," Stannard seemed to rule out the eruption and interruption of any other feeling; and by using the deflationary word "rhetoric," he portrayed expressions of gladness at the approach of death as self-delusions, a sort of whistling in the dark. Thus, he made the ambivalence disappear.15

This set the stage for Gordon Geddes. While acknowledging that Puritans felt guilty and therefore envisioned death with "many of its late medieval horrors," Geddes maintained that after years of struggling for assurance of salvation, most people achieved it. "Those who believed in a Christ who justified by faith alone," said Geddes, "could
welcome death, whatever its pains and terrors, assured that Christ would preserve them through even that dark valley." Like Ludwig, Geddes quoted Samuel Willard, but to different effect. "It is no hurt to die if we die Saints." Geddes, however, did not merely conclude that Stannard had exaggerated the Puritans' fear of death, but instead accused Stannard of making "questionable" use of sources. This provoked Stannard to defend his procedures and to suggest that Geddes was either dishonest or obtuse.16

A few years have passed since this exchange of scholarly volleys, and the smoke has cleared enough for us to count the casualties: two straw men dead, and three historians wounded. It is now apparent that the Puritans did not face death without terror at the possibility of eternal pain; that they did not face it without hope for eternal joy; and that all three scholars, at one point or another, have agreed on the Puritans' ambivalence. What remains to be done, I think, is to look a little longer at that ambivalence, exploring how two such contrary feelings could exist not merely in one culture but in one person.

Stannard considers the ambivalence untenable. The horror and the happiness, he says, produced "an uncomfortable tension, that pressed for resolution. A culture, no less than an individual, cannot long endure such pressure." The fact is, however, that they did. As Stannard himself shows, an individual like Increase Mather endured the tension throughout his seemingly interminable life, and a culture like New England's endured it throughout the Puritan period. Thus the marriage of terror and hope may have been tense, but at least it was stable.17

Indeed, the tension helps account for the stability. Rather than eroding one another, terror and hope were mutually reinforcing. The more one feared death, the more one rejoiced at the hope of salvation; the more one envisioned the bliss of heaven, the more woeful one felt at the prospect of exclusion from it. Benjamin Colman shows how fear could augment happiness. "It becomes a Saint to meet death with fear," he said, "for he is yet a Sinner, and is going before the HOLY ONE, and into his ETERNAL State; and every Believer has not a full assurance." Fear, however, was not supposed to be the end result. Having denied the possibility of full assurance of salvation, Colman then offers a partial assurance. "It will be the more bright and sweet, if it be possible to pass out of the darkness of fear into the Inheritance of the Saints in Light. O how happy to find the dark fears groundless, and pass'd away for ever!" Ministers like Colman would emphasize how darkness makes light seem brighter. Left unsaid, but all too obvious, was the converse fact that a glimpse of the light makes the darkness seem more intense: the history of Puritan New England is spotted with people like Jonathan Edwards's uncle who, unable to join the throng of the converted, cut his throat in despair. These religious suicides, however, do not indicate that people could not endure the tension between hope and horror. They indicate that people could not endure the loss of tension and the complete triumph of horror.18

But let us drop unpleasant subjects and return our attention to gravestones. What does the Puritans' ambivalent attitude toward death have to do with the Death's Head?

To people of the twentieth century, accustomed to Halloween costumes and to noisy rides in the dark at amusement parks, the Death's Head seems intended to induce simple fright. I believe, however, that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its effect was different. The skull was not like a suddenly discovered corpse which plunged one into panic, but like an idea which one must ponder before it could have any effect.
Its immediate appeal was not to the emotions but to the intellect. In this respect the Death’s Head was different from the transi, the exquisite sculpture of human decay which had adorned European tombs of the late Middle Ages. Half-decomposed cadavers with shriveled flesh penetrated by worms or devoured by toads, the transi had produced instant and inescapable revulsion. The Death’s Head, in contrast, was sanitized to such an extent that rather than represent the concrete reality of dying, it represented the abstract reality of death. The dry white skull, stripped of flesh and blood, directed attention away from the material world of the grave and evoked thoughts of the spiritual world which lay beyond. These thoughts may have led to anxiety, even terror, as one imagined the emptiness of nonexistence or the punishments of hell; but the point is that one had to imagine, and imagination could lead to more than one state of mind. As Gordon Geddes has demonstrated, the Puritans did often find assurance: after viewing the possibility of hell, they frequently arrived at the hope of heaven. Death, then, was to the seventeenth-century mind the gateway to both torment and bliss; the Death’s Head, consequently, was not merely horrific, like a transi, but also beatific. It was this pleasanter effect of the Death’s Head which made it possible for Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall to stroll through a graveyard as a form of recreation. When they studied the pictures and copied the epitaphs, they were not just indulging an appetite for doom and decay but also refreshing their spirits with thoughts of redemption. In the Death’s Head they saw an objective correlative of their own ambivalent attitude toward death.19

As already suggested, however, the ambivalence was not self-contradictory: terror and hope heightened one another. Moreover, the two emotions both contributed to a single, general attitude toward death, namely, awe. Whether one shrank at the prospect of damnation or collapsed ecstatically at the prospect of salvation, one felt oneself in the presence of something tremendous. Death was the onset of what Puritans sometimes called a “great change,” a transformation from the temporal to the eternal. The Death’s Head signaled an acute consciousness of that change. What was most noteworthy here was the absence of the calm, resigned attitude which Philippe Ariès has found in medieval and early modern Europe. Insofar as the Death’s Head reflected attitudes toward death, the traditional indifference had been obliterated in the late seventeenth century by a fearful reverence.20

The third major style of gravestone carving prominently displays a distinctive motif, a human face with wings, which has traveled under different names. Dethlefsen and Deetz call that motif the “Cherub.” The word ‘cherub,’ however, is not quite adequate, for it connotes a youthfulness, chubbiness, and comeliness which are often lacking in the actual stones. Allan Ludwig, taking a different approach, calls this same motif the “Soul Effigy”; but there are two problems with this term. First, the words have a drab abstractness which leaves one’s mouth with an aftertaste of sociology. Second, as Ludwig acknowledges, the things pictured are not always the souls of redeemed human beings but instead are sometimes the superhuman angels of the Lord. Frederick Burgess and Peter Benes, taking yet another tack, call the motif in question the “Angel”; and this label is probably the most useful one. If we use the word ‘angel’ in its looser sense, meaning not only one of God’s lieutenants but also the spirit of a mortal who has joined the heavenly host, then the word pretty well covers all the images in this category. Moreover, angel (unlike cherub) is not precise in its conno-
tation of appearance: an angel may be young or old, fat or skinny, cute or intimidating. Thus, angel is the best word available for describing the essential motif of this third style of American gravestone; and, hence, for describing the style itself.  

Angels appear on some seventeenth-century gravestones but do not become prevalent until the mid-eighteenth. Sometimes they are expertly carved so as to resemble the cherubs of painting and high-style sculpture, with trumpets in their pudgy hands and smiles glowing on their faces (Fig. 6). Sometimes—whether because of the carver's lack of skill or because of his irrepressible will-to-abstraction—the figures are not so recognizable (Fig. 7). The unfamiliarity of some Angels is due to the fact that they started out as Death's Heads. A series of photographs by Allan Ludwig shows how New England carvers between the 1720s and the 1750s transformed, step by step, the winged skull into the winged face, adding flesh to bare bone and turning the toothy grin of death into the blissful smile of a saved soul—a gradual transformation which Philippe Ariès calls "almost cinematic." By the time of the Revolution, the Angel had supplanted the Death's Head as the most popular style in American cemeteries.  

Some Angels represent divine creatures; others, the souls of redeemed men and women; but all carry the same message to people who view the stones—heaven. During the eighteenth century, as the balmy humanism of the Enlightenment spread comfortably across the Western world, Americans lost much of their old sense of inveterate sin and their horrifying suspicion that they were damned. In this Age of Reason they acquired a healthy respect for the goodness of mankind (that is, themselves) and a serene expectation of a well-deserved salvation. The old ambivalence—the vertiginous lurchings between hopefulness at the thought of heaven and terror at the thought of hell—gave way to a simple happy anticipation of endless happiness. This new attitude was expressed by Ellis Gray on his deathbed and reiterated by Samuel Mather (son of Cotton) in 1753. Thanks to Gray's "upright Walk before the LORD, and his Consciousness to it," reported Mather, Gray was able to depart this life with these words: "The next Time, said He, you see our Brethren; tell them for me to love GOD and CHRIST, and love one another, and love their Work, and go on steadily in it And then they will have Peace and Comfort, as I have." The possibility of eternal torment was, for Gray, nowhere in sight.  

Of course, this momentous change in attitudes toward death was neither instantaneous nor complete. As Gordon Geddes points out, seventeenth-century Puritans had often taken for granted the salvation of their friends and relatives, if not themselves; and gravestones had sometimes expressed this confidence. Death's Heads had been accompanied in the graveyard (and sometimes on individual stones) by more encouraging symbols such as flowers and Angels and by epitaphs which affirmed that heaven was the destination of the deceased. Conversely, even in the eighteenth century preachers still warned about the fires of hell (especially during the Great Awakening), and artisans still carved bones and hourglasses onto marble or sandstone slabs. Allan Ludwig speculates that Puritan scruples against feelings of "security" remained so intense that carvers, after putting Angels onto gravestones, occasionally had second thoughts and therefore excised the faces, leaving only the ambiguity of wings. So the reversal was not complete.  

Nevertheless, it was a reversal. Although the Death's Head still appeared on gravestones in the late eighteenth century, the Angel was the most common motif. Although Jonathan Edwards might spend a
lifetime exhorting people to consider themselves likely candidates for hell, his own daughter was so sure of her future "glorious state" that she could not help hoping that death was near. Esther Edwards may have carried this confidence in salvation a little further than most people of her time—extremism not being unknown in her family—but she nevertheless reflected the unalloyed assurance which characterized the latter half of the century. When Seth Coleman's daughter died of smallpox in 1776, he noted in his journal that he had reason to hope she had gone to an infinitely better world. When Hannah Tiffany was buried in 1785, her gravestone featured an Angel and a matter-of-fact declaration of Christian success: "I have sought & found him." In a gradual, incomplete, but nonetheless remarkable process, the old mixture of hope and horror had given way to a sense of security.25

Compared to the scholarly literature about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Amer-
ican gravestones, that about nineteenth- and twentieth-century stones seems amazingly scant: no fat volumes of photographs and rubbings, no articles in journals, and only brief, occasional mention in monographs. As the gravestone interpreter moves from the colonial period to more recent times, he is like someone who, after a long climb from the bottom of a resisting sea, suddenly finds himself hurtling through the thin medium of the stratosphere.

Consider the dates given in the titles of the larger works about gravestones: Forbes, 1653–1800; Ludwig, 1650–1815; Butler, 1650–1775; Benes, 1689–1805; Tashjian and Tashjian, “Early” New England; Wasserman, “Early” New York and New Jersey. There are many reasons why these works terminate around 1800, not the least of which is the fact that human endurance is limited. Another reason, however, is that in the nineteenth century, gravestone carving became much more mechanized, standardized, and commercialized than it had been before; as Ludwig says, neo-classical images from pattern books overwhelmed the vernacular tradition like a tidal wave. To people interested in gravestones as a form of folk art, this change drastically reduced the stones’ appeal.26

But there is still another reason why gravestone studies end with the early nineteenth century, a reason concerning the stones’ intellectual environment. Peter Benes argues that by 1805 Puritan “orthodoxy”—the Calvinist system of religious and philosophical ideas—was giving way to “rationalism and universalism”; and that gravestones, which as “masks of orthodoxy” reflected current ideas, therefore also changed. Benes is correct, I believe, but his interpretation can be imposed on an even larger set of events. What is transformed around 1800 is not merely Puritanism but Western civilization; what goes into decline is not merely Calvinism but Christianity, or at least that Platonic kind of Christianity which emphasizes the afterlife rather than this life. The Jeffersonian era marked, I think, a fundamental turning point, not only in gravestone carving but also in attitudes toward death and, indeed, in religious and metaphysical attitudes in general. To go from 1650 or 1750 to 1850 or 1950 is to cross into another universe. To write a monograph or dissertation attempting to encompass two such radically different worlds would be foolhardy. So vast a leap may be taken only in a short essay.27

The fourth major style of gravestone carving—and the one marking the single most important turning point in the history of American mortuary art—has come to be called the Urn-and-Willow, though it might be more accurately (albeit inelegantly) labeled the Urn-and/or-Willow. Examples of this style feature an urn like the ones which contained the ashes of the dead in ancient Greece and Rome: drooping vegetation which resembles a willow; or both. Frequently the urn or willow is accompanied by a figure of somebody, usually a woman, crying (Fig. 8). The Urn-and-Willow first occurred on American gravestones in the 1780s, then became dominant in the early nineteenth century. As Faye Baker has shown, the motif even escaped from the gravestone and showed up in other forms of folk art, including painting, needlework, and popular verse. Not till mid-century did the Urn-and-Willow fade into oblivion.28

Like the earlier styles of gravestone carving, the Urn-and-Willow originated in Europe—in this case, with Europe’s classical revival. Drawings of urns appeared in the margin above the preface to Volume I (1762) of James Stuart and Nicholas Revett’s influential Antiquities of Athens, while an urn and some sort of leafy plant appeared on a chair depicted in Volume III (1794) (Fig. 9). The willow tree that solemnifies American lawns today (Salix babylonica) was not
imported from China until the nineteenth century. The plant known as "weeping willow" (or saule pleureur or Tränenweide) in eighteenth-century Europe was a shrub, not a tree, often located in cemeteries; and it was this shrub which was copied by American gravestone carvers before the tree became familiar. But if like earlier gravestone styles the Urn-and-Willow originated in Europe, it was similar to them in a second way as well: it became popular in America not because Americans mindlessly and pointlessly imitated European fashions but because the style accorded with psychological and philosophical attitudes which Europeans and Americans shared. These included attitudes toward death.²⁹

The attitude toward death expressed most obviously by the Urn-and-Willow is mourning. The willow, with its slumping posture, intimates the spiritual weariness of someone bereaved; and, when the wind blows, there is something melancholy in the soft clatter of a thousand leaves. Then, too, there are sorrowful associations induced by literary tradition. In Psalm 137 the people of Israel sit down by the rivers of Babylon, hang their harps upon the willows, remember Zion, and weep. In English literature the willow is again related to weeping, but not to weeping for the loss of Zion: the willow in the sixteenth century is a symbol for lost or unrequited love. By the time the willow appears on gravestones, it represents grief over someone's death. When the willow is accompanied by a burial urn, or when the motif appears on a gravestone, there can be no doubt that the cause of mourning is death.³⁰

In the early nineteenth century such mourning became commonplace, reduced (or, rather, elevated) to ritual. When someone died, his survivors often would memorialize him not merely by holding funeral services and erecting a gravestone, but by painting or stitching "mourning pictures" (usually featuring the Urn-and-Willow) and writing elegies. Lydia Sigourney, known in her time as the Sweet Singer of Hartford, published sixty-seven books, many of which consisted of rhymed tributes to the recently dead. In her preface to The Weeping Willow (1846) Sigourney explained the reason for her poems' popularity: "An increasing desire among those who endure the sundering of affection's ties for some simple lyric, fashioned to their own peculiar wound, marks our state of society, and, perhaps, the age in which we live." A few decades later Mark
Twain parodied this obsessive tending of emotional wounds by describing in *Huckleberry Finn* the artwork of young Emmeline Grangerford. Before her own untimely death, Emmeline had drawn mourning pictures. One of these, reported Huck, was of a woman in a slim black dress 'leaning pensive on a tombstone on her right elbow, under a weeping willow . . . and underneath the picture it said 'Shall I Never See Thee More Alas.'” Emmeline also wrote poems, such as “Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec’d.” As Huck said, “She warn’t particular, she could write about anything you choose to give her to write about, just so it was sadful. Every time a man died, or a woman died, or a child died, she would be on hand with her ‘tribute’ before he was cold.” This is reminiscent of what another humorist said about Lydia Sigourney: the inevitability with which one of her lugubrious poems followed the demise of a prominent person had added a new terror to death.31

The laughter provoked by satire, however, should not obscure the fact that in the early nineteenth century, grief over deaths was certainly pervasive and probably intense. Lawrence Stone has argued that in England by 1800 “affective relationships” had grown much stronger than they had been in 1500; and that, consequently, sorrow over the death of others had likewise grown. If Stone is right, then developments in England seem to have paralleled those in America. Of course, grief had never been absent from the colonies: when Samuel Sewall watched his mother’s coffin laid into the ground, he “could hardly speak for passion and Tears.” Nevertheless, the visual and literary evidence indicates that Americans of the nineteenth century grieved more than those of a century or two earlier.32

Certainly sorrow was encouraged as never
before. While a Puritan minister like Samuel Willard might have acknowledged the necessity of venting natural grief, he also had reminded his parishioners that "the Christian religion giveth us Rules for the due bounding and right regulating of these passions." By the nineteenth century, however, mourning was not merely tolerated but positively and energetically cultivated. Girls like Emmeline Grangerford painted mourning pictures; poets like Lydia Sigourney kept probing every "peculiar Wound" made by "the sundering of affection's ties"; gravestone carvers dotted cemeteries with urns and willows; and, at a somewhat higher level of artistry, Harriet Beecher Stowe gave readers a good cry at the death of Little Eva. The Christian religion had ceased to provide effective bounds to grief, or at least had drastically slackened those bounds.33

What had happened by the nineteenth century was that death had ceased to be a transcendental phenomenon and had become a social one; the most important relationships had become horizontal (between dead people and living ones) rather than vertical (between man and God). Instead of expressing fear of hell or hope for heaven, people now were more likely to express sadness at the demise of others. This is not to say the belief in an afterlife had suddenly and utterly vanished—the Second Great Awakening was proof to the contrary, if such proof be needed. However, despite the persisting religious sentiment, there was a notable new emphasis on human existence. In the graveyard, Angels became scarce.

If in the early nineteenth century mourning was the most conspicuous attitude toward death, there was a second, somewhat covert attitude which later would become overt and indeed preeminent. That second attitude was defiance: a resistance to death, an attempt to achieve an immortality which would not depend on the existence of any heaven. While the ceremony of mourning was a way of venting heartfelt grief, it also was a way of honoring the dead; and such an honor offered a kind of eternal life. As long as one's memory was kept alive by someone else's grief, one was not entirely dead. When Mount Auburn Cemetery was opened in 1831, Joseph Story gave a dedication speech which showed the interrelationship among mourning, memory, and immortality. After noting that the strongest and most universal human feelings included "the desire to die in the arms of our friends; to have the last sad offices to our remains performed by their affections," he said that henceforth the dying citizens of greater Boston would derive pleasure from the thought that their bodies would lie in a place as beautiful and well-tended as Mount Auburn. The reason? Our "earthly remains will still retain the tender regard of those whom we leave behind," and "our place of burial will be remembered for generations." To people of the young republic, it seemed that the hearts and minds of posterity could grant immortality.34

Of course, such a notion was not new: Thucydides had said as much. But between Thucydides and Joseph Story occurred something called Christianity which—with its Platonic tinge, its doctrines of heaven and hell, and its insistence on the vanity of human existence—militated against any worldly concept of eternal life. As Erwin Panofsky points out, the Pauline (and, it might be added, Puritan) notion that man is justified by faith, not works, devalued man's worldly achievements and thereby discouraged commemorating him as an individual. This resulted, says Panofsky, in the banishment of the "retrospective principle" from funerary sculpture and in the reign of a "prospective principle" which emphasized not what the deceased had done, but what would happen to him in the afterlife on account of his faith. Translated into stone in colonial America, that Chris-
tian prospective principle resulted in Death's Heads and Angels. But when Angels gave way to Urn-and-Willows, when mourning supplanted fear and hope as the primary attitude toward death, when the pagan retrospective principle returned to dominance, then these were signals that "orthodoxy" was in decline. A signal of even further decline would be issued a few years later by the next style of gravestones.35

Thorstein Veblen would call them conspicuously wasteful; today's young people would call them gross; but call them what you will, the gravestones of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were certainly remarkable. There was no single motif, comparable to the Death's Head or the Urn-and-Willow, which predominated. Instead, there was a proliferation of different motifs. Gathering all these varieties into one eclectic category, I call the style of the late Victorian period Monumental. The word stems from a Greek root meaning "to remind"; and the purpose of Monumental gravestones is to remind us not (like the Death's Head) of the general fact of mortality, but rather (like the Urn-and-Willow) of the past life of a particular person. There were two general means by which the Monument did this.

First was variety itself. By demonstrating originality, audacity, or at the very least peculiarity, the stone called attention to itself and to the person over whose body it stood. A partial list of the kinds of gravestone motifs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would include the following: emblems of the deceased's profession (e.g., a bayonet for a soldier, a pen for a writer, a Bible for a preacher); imitations of natural objects (e.g., logs, tree stumps, even rocks); gothic arches like windows from cathedrals; Egyptian or classical columns, the latter type often broken at the top; crosses—showing the erosion of anti-Papist inhibitions; statues of angels; sculptures (for children's graves) of lambs, doves, and cradles; and geometric spheres and boxes. Some stones had no pictures or sculptures but called attention to themselves by means of a variety of sizes and styles of lettering, like headlines in a newspaper. One of the most common kinds of gravestone was the obelisk. The Bunker Hill Monument (dedicated 1843) and the Washington Monument (begun in 1848 but not completed till 1885) served as examples for thousands of other memorials, so that sections of some cemeteries became forests of obelisks. The obelisk, like the pyramid, was Egyptian; and it too represented a determined resistance to the sands of time.

The second means by which Monumental stones called attention to themselves was sheer size. Obelisks rose to ten or twenty feet; granite spheres and cubes weighed tons. Whereas stones before the mid-nineteenth century usually had been only two or three inches thick, later stones swelled to eight or ten inches or more: the plane grew into a solid. There was something gargantuan about late Victorian architecture—H. H. Richardson built a gatekeeper's lodge out of boulders—and this same striving for the massive and the durable affected mortuary art as well.36

In its attitude toward death, the Monument was retrospective like the Urn-and-Willow, but in an even more individualistic way. A single artistic motif and uniform size would no longer serve for everybody; Monuments used variety and immensity to commemorate more forcefully the special qualities of the dead. The Urn-and-Willows had all said, "Remember me, and weep." The Monuments also said, "Remember me"; but they often gave a particular reason for doing so (the dead's profession, youthfulness, achievement, etc.) and invited a particular response (e.g., curiosity, pity, admiration). The bond between the living and the dead...
remained strong, but now it was more tightly fastened to distinct individuals.

During the nineteenth century there was a growing reluctance to let go of the dead, even of their physical remains. No Americans seem to have followed the extreme examples of Madame Suzanne Curchod Necker, who instructed that her corpse be preserved under glass in a tank of alcohol, or of Jeremy Bentham, who asked to be permanently embalmed and kept at the University of London for occasional examination and display. (Bentham’s corpse, now fitted with a head made of wax, is regularly wheeled into college meetings, where it is duly recorded in the minutes as “present, but not voting.”) However, Americans did clip hair from the dead and tuck it into lockets or weave it into mourning pictures. After the Civil War, Americans did become the world’s foremost consumers of embalming fluid, and they did buy airtight coffins which promised (untruthfully) to keep bodies from decay. A critic might complain in 1856 that “many of the processes adopted by blind affection and superstitious homage, to rescue the poor human casket [i.e., body] from decay, are grotesque and undesirable.” Nevertheless, those processes grew ever more popular. As one observer wrote in 1869 after visiting the ostentatious Broadway shops which specialized in coffins, America was being “Egyptianized,” becoming a land of mummies. Hermetic welding and arterial-injection embalming, moreover, were not the only means by which modern technology might preserve the dead. After Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, he predicted that the machine would be used to keep forever the voices and last words of dying relatives.37

Some Americans refused to give up the bodies of the dead; others, their spirits. R. Laurence Moore has shown that in Victorian America belief in spirits was widespread and was associated with other unorthodox beliefs such as a denial of a final judgment of the soul. To the spiritualist it seemed that while people might pass to another world, they never entirely forsook this one. Believing in spirits was a means of assuaging grief: the “dead” were not merely alive but actually present and even, sometimes, communicative. Not surprisingly, spiritualism boomed right after the Civil War, when Americans were desperate for such consolation.38

This was not, however, the only kind of non-Christian “spirit” which offered hope of life beyond the grave but not so far away as heaven. There was also that utterly immaterial variety which existed in memory and history, like the Spirit of ’76. Here, for example, is what Arthur B. Fuller said in his Discourse Occasioned by the Death of Richard Hazen Ayer (1853):

His active life is over, its labors are ended, his body sleeps within the tomb, yet he lives in what his life accomplished; lives through an act of beneficence to religious institutions which does honor to his memory, and long shall preserve it; and the spirit lives on immortal though the body has crumbled to kindred dust.

This passage is a little ambiguous. It implies that it is remembrance of accomplishment which keeps the “spirit” alive, but it does not explicitly say so. No such ambiguity, however, remained sixty years later when Lyman Abbott published an article with the optimistic title “There Are No Dead.” Recalling how liberal theology had reformed funerary practices, Abbott took satisfaction from the fact that “on the memorials which we place where they lie who have vanished from our sight we no longer carve the skull and crossbones, the hourglass and the scythe—we recall some trait or quality or achievement that survives the body and commemorates the spirit.” Man’s memory, not God’s grace, was the ultimate life-support system. After studying the obituaries of Vermilion County, Illinois, James Farrell reports that by 1876 they emphasized the
secular achievements rather than the religious faith of the dead. The obituaries also had begun to list the surviving children of the deceased, thus implying yet another form of earthly immortality—one lived on in one’s progeny. 39

The decline of faith in heaven was no secret in the late nineteenth century. In 1889 a college professor said that personal immortality was an issue upon which “the consensus of Christendom is little, the dissensus is great, the questions undefined greater still.” It also was no secret that this loss of faith had a visible effect on mortuary art. In an article of 1895 called “American Cemeteries Are Pagan,” a foreign visitor said this: “The greater the labor and expense incurred in heaping up splendor above the remains, the stronger is the evidence that nothing better was hoped for in the hereafter.” The Monumental style was a testament of disbelief. In the twentieth century the Monumental style would fall out of fashion, but that does not mean that disbelief fell also. Instead, it merely expressed itself in a different way. 40

The sixth and final style of gravestone carving is the Modern Plain Style. Like the Plain Style of the seventeenth century, that of the twentieth consists of an absence of ornament and a minimum of inscription (Fig. 10). Some plain stones had appeared in every period of American history, but beginning around 1900 they arrived in swarms. World War I, with its high casualties in the service of high ideals, gave a last hurrah to Monument-building (the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, for example); but thereafter the graveyard belonged to the Plain Style. Looking over a cemetery today, one sees an army of more or less identical stones: rectangular parallelepipeds two or three feet high, distinguished only by their names.

Assuming, that is, that one can see any stones at all. A unique achievement of the contemporary cemetery is to make grave-

![Gravestone of Annie McFarlin, Carver, Massachusetts, 1975.](image)

markers so inconspicuous as to be almost undiscoverable. Many graveyards forbid the erection of a vertical stone; they require markers to lie flush with the turf, so as not to obstruct the view or the lawnmower. Anyone wishing to find a particular grave must remember its position in relation to a given shrub, a water faucet, or a subtle depression in the terrain. Anyone wishing to stroll randomly among the gravestones, contemplating them in the manner of Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall, will find this activity not merely pointless but impossible; for the stones lie hidden rather than rising up to greet the passerby. One might as well stroll on a golf course. The epitome of the plain and inconspicuous, however, is not the flat gravestone but the small rectangular slab covering the orifice of the modern crypt (Fig. 11). The current and growing fashion for burial is not to have one’s own private patch of land but instead to occupy one cell in a high-rise honeycomb of crypts, a condominium for the dead. These crypts—mass-produced and uniform—often have markers to match: blank panels disturbed by nothing but names and dates. What a century ago was a monument is today a label on a filing cabinet. In the smaller mausoleums (such as at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts) the
identification—panels face outdoors, and the row upon row of polished rectangles remind one of a bank or factory in the International Style. In the larger mausoleums (such as the Covina Hills campus of California's Forest Lawn Memorial-Parks) the panels face inward onto hallways, like stamped crates in a warehouse, thus leaving the exterior walls free for such ornamentation as a 172-foot mosaic of the life of Jesus. Decoration has not entirely vanished from mortuary art; but where it still exists, it often has ceased to be associated with any one grave. The individual has given way to the collective.41

But again the question is why, and again the answer is complicated. Plain Style stones, whether in the seventeenth century or the twentieth, produce an ambiguity like that left behind by an unanswered letter. Explanations for the silence are multiple and uncertain, and one can only guess at their relative importance.

One reason for the Modern Plain Style is the persistence of the traditional, resigned attitude toward death. Though undermined first by promises of heaven and threats of hell, then by strengthened ties of human affection, and finally by the agnostic impulse to rage against the dying of the light, the medieval attitude of indifference to death somehow survived into modern times. Consider, for example, a public opinion survey taken in the late 1960s and analyzed by John W. Riley Jr. When asked for their "image of death," 54 percent of the respondents said it was "like a long sleep"—an image which, as Philippe Ariès points out—is pre-Christian. Consider also Robert Frost's poem "Home Burial," published in 1914. In it a woman inconsolably mourns the loss of her firstborn child, and stares with fear and bitterness at its grave. Her husband, however, hardly notices the little family cemetery. "I must be wonted to it," he says; like the
peasants described by Ariès, the man is familiar with death—and with other forms of natural demise. After digging the grave for the child, he had come into the kitchen, leaned his shovel against a wall, and said, "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day/Will rot the best birch fence a man can build." The wife, possessing a daintier sense of death, had been horrified by his attitude and by the attitude of people in general. "Friends make pretense of following one to the grave," she now complains, "But before one is in it, their minds are turned/And making the best of their way back to life. . . ." The woman, unwilling to forget her dead baby, will have none of this; she considers her husband a "blind creature" and threatens to run out of the house, in search of someone more sympathetic. The wife and husband represent two different attitudes toward death; and if they were turned by magic into gravestones, they would be respectively an Urn-and-Willow and a Plain Style. Both are anachronistic, carrying into the twentieth century the typical characteristics of earlier times.42

Another factor behind the Modern Plain Style may be a decline in the grief felt by the survivors of the recently dead and, consequently, a decline in the perceived need for elaborate gravestones to commemorate them. It would be hard to support the assertion that affective ties are weaker now than a century ago; it would not be so hard, however, to support the assertions (1) that more people who die nowadays are elderly, and (2) that survivors feel less sorrow over the death of the old than over that of the young or middle-aged. Robert and Julie Fulton have estimated that 62 percent of the Americans who died in 1976 were sixty-five or older, compared to 17 percent in 1900. It is not possible to quantify grief so as to compare that over an old person's death to that over a younger person's. However, there is reason to believe that people (including the elderly themselves) consider the death of the elderly as something natural and fitting, coming after a long and full life (sometimes too long and full); while the death of a younger person seems like the abrupt, unnatural, and unfair termination of a life which had not yet run its course. Ripeness may not be all, but it counts for something. According to Robert S. Morison, "Death is now more often than not accepted or even welcomed as an appropriate end to a life in which former joys are turning into present sorrows and previous achievements have given place to frustrations." Except for the absence of any considerable familiarity with death, this acceptance or welcoming of it seems very similar to the resignation which was evident in the Middle Ages and which underlay the earlier Plain Style.43

A third force behind the Modern Plain Style is religious: the old, much-discredited, but remarkably enduring idea that man should not place too high a value on earthly things, including man himself. The Church of England's Churchyard Handbook recommends that a gravestone inscription contain only genealogical data and perhaps a few words from Scripture which console or instruct; "it must not," however, "be laudatory." When in 1962 a seventy-five-year-old woman had the words "Forever in my thoughts" placed on her husband's tomb, a church court ordered them removed. "It is our opinion," said a priest, "that strong expressions of affection or grief are out of place." Here in America the clergy have occasionally protested against funerary extravagance and have called for a more otherworldly response to death. Insofar as religion continues to be effective, it works against both the Urn-and-Willow and the Monument; and when it does not produce a distinctly sectarian decoration, such as a cross, it contributes to the Modern Plain Style.44

The final likely cause of the Modern Plain Style is an attitude toward death which, while its power and pervasiveness in society
may have been exaggerated in the recent literature, is nevertheless striking; namely, an attitude of studied ignorance. People build simple gravestones partly because a large, ornamented, conspicuously placed stone might draw attention to the dead and thereby induce thoughts about death—thoughts which most people would rather avoid. In a celebrated article called “The Pornography of Death,” Geoffrey Gorer says that in Britain and America the taboo which formerly had fallen upon sex now falls upon death. For death as for sex, it is sometimes all right to do it, but it is never all right to talk about it or to watch somebody else doing it.45

The cultivation of ignorance was the goal set forth by an article in the Ladies Home Journal in 1913. “We must adopt some philosophy or some new customs and ideals that will make death less of a tragedy,” wrote someone calling herself a “Plain Country Woman”:

When it is the only sure thing we know of, why should we take the pains to prepare ourselves to be hurt by it instead of arming ourselves with some sort of philosophy which will save us? . . . Shall we learn in the new education that is coming to us, this new spiritual idea that is going around among us, not to mention trouble or grief or sickness or sin, but to treat them as if they do not exist, and speak only of the sweet and pleasant things of life?

In the face of death, ignorance is our only salvation; and keepers of graveyards therefore found ways to conceal the sting of death. They flattened the traditional grave mound, thus removing one distinctive reminder of mortality. They shrunk or leveled gravestones and minimized their decoration and inscription. As one graveyard superintendent said in 1910, “Today cemetery making is an art, and gradually all things that suggest death, sorrow, or pain are being eliminated.” In the twentieth century, burial grounds are supposed to direct our attention away from the dead. Cotton Mather would not be pleased.46

Indeed, Cotton Mather would be displeased with a great many things nowadays, not least of which is the view (or non-view) of the afterlife. Scholars have agreed that today’s determined avoidance of thoughts about death is rooted in a lack of faith in any future existence. According to Geoffrey Gorer, “without some such belief natural death and physical decomposition have become too horrible to contemplate”; while according to Milton Gatch, disbelief in immortality has made it impossible for us to understand or explain death and therefore has compelled us to hide it. After interviewing hundreds of “terminal” patients, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross concludes that religion enabled only a very few of them—such as a born-again dentist and a seventeen-year-old girl—to overcome anxiety about death. Kübler-Ross’s chapter about patients’ “Hope” does not concern the proximity of heaven but the possibility of cure.47

But what of all the recent fuss? What about the profusion of books and articles about death, including this one? What about the thousand college courses on “Death and Dying,” the seminars in hospitals, the almost gleeful rush to study the subject? Does not all this betoken an intense curiosity about death and a willingness to confront it? Does not this rebuke the charge of willful ignorance of death and underlying disbelief in afterlife? Does not this hint that the Modern Plain Style, the funerary mask of agnostic orthodoxy, will soon be swept from the graveyard?48

In a word, no. As Kübler-Ross says about her class which interviewed dying patients in hospitals, “A student wrote in a paper that the most amazing aspect of this seminar was perhaps that we talked so little about death itself.” Kübler-Ross and other scholars have not asked what death is or what happens to someone after he dies. Instead they have asked how dying people respond
to their condition and how healthy people respond to the dying and death of others. Death itself remains taboo. And insofar as the Modern Plain Style of gravestone reflects that taboo, the style is likely to persist.49

We have traveled a long road. Looking back to the seventeenth century from the vantage point of the twentieth, one sees important changes in styles of gravestone carving and in the attitudes toward death which they reflect. The original Plain Style is the one most difficult to interpret, indicating a resigned attitude toward death but indicating even more clearly an absence of skills, tools, and money. After the late seventeenth century, however, the meaning of the stones is more apparent. The styles change from the Death’s Head and the Angel, which are prospective, anticipating heaven or hell; to the Urn-and-Willow and the Monument, which are retrospective, commemorating past lives; to the Modern Plain Style, which is, so to speak, no-spective, looking neither forward nor back. In the eighteenth century death was a religious phenomenon, a matter between man and God. In the nineteenth it was a social phenomenon, between living people and dead ones. In the twentieth it is no phenomenon at all.

* * *

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NOTES


6. My demarcation of the first four periods is based on (1) quantified data provided by Dethlefsen and Deetz, Gorman and DiBlasi, and Baker; and (2) my own impressions after walking through many burial grounds. My demarcation of the last two periods is wholly impressionistic.

7. Nobody has compiled a reliable general index of gravestone prices, but Allan Ludwig (Graven Images, 59) estimates that in colonial New England carved stones usually cost between three and ten pounds. Plain Style stones presumably cost less than decorated ones, but calculating the degree of difference is likely to remain for some time as a heroic task awaiting the practitioners of quantitative history.


9. Stannard, Puritan Way of Death, 116; Benes, Masks of Orthodoxy, 37, 225; Geddes, Welcome Joy, 150. On the paucity of gravestones in Europe, see Ariès, Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 22; Ariès, Hour of Our Death, 338–339; Burgess, English Churchyard Memorials, 27.

10. Ariès, Hour of Our Death, 9–10, 16, 22–23, 28; quotation in Ariès, Western Attitudes, 103.


12. Ibid., 51.


16. Geddes to Editor, AHR 80, No. 1 (February 1975): 205–206; Stannard to Editor, No. 4 (October 1975), 1077–1078; Geddes, Welcome Joy, 1, 8, 22, 35–36.


20. Stannard, Puritan Way of Death, 57. For examples of Puritans describing death as ‘change,’ see Geddes, Welcome Joy, 10; and Tashjian and Tashjian, Memorials for Children of Change, 10.


27. Benes, Masks of Orthodoxy, 151, 193. For the argument that a belief in immortality is not essential to Christian theology, see Gatch, Death, 15–18, 130–134. One exceptionally audacious dissertation is Faye Baker’s which vaults from 1750 to 1850.


31. Ibid., 186; Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884; Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 86–88; Dictionary
of American Biography, 9 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936); 155–156.


35. Gatch, Death, 130; Panofsky, Tomb Sculpture, 16, 39, 69–70. For more on how the retrospective tendency declines around the fifth century, see Ariès, Hour of Our Death, 202–203. Ariès, unlike Panofsky, however, does not attribute this decline to Christianity, which he sees as fairly ineffectual throughout the Middle Ages (p. 129).

36. The gatekeeper’s lodge was on the Oakes Ames estate in North Easton, Massachusetts.


41. A color photograph and a description of the “Life of Christ” mosaic are in the brochure “Forest Lawn Memorial-Parks and Mortuaries” (1977). Needless to say, the Covina Hills mausoleum is more in accord with the Plain Style than are many of the other memorials in the Forest Lawn park system.


44. Burgess, English Churchyard Memorials, 229; Ariès, Hour of Our Death, 530; Mitford, American Way, 241–258.

45. The article, originally published in Encounter in October 1955, is reprinted in Gorer, Death, Grief, and Mourning, 192–199.


47. Gorer, Death, Grief, and Mourning, 24, 196; Gatch, Death, 15; Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying. 110, 112–138, 179–190, 237. See also Jackson, “Death in American Life,” in Passing, 235; and Ariès, Hour of Our Death, 573.

48. Statistics on publications and courses about death are in Fulton, ed., Death and Identity, xiii–xiv.

49. Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying, 239.