THE AESTHETIC CORPSE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about dead bodies. It is about individual identity and the way that individual identity came to inhere in the body in a specific historical context – that of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. Funerary practices which emerged in Britain at that time are different to those which went before. Even the use of individual coffins in which to inter corpses, although increasingly known through the early modern period (Gittings 1984: 13), only became really widespread in the nineteenth century. The increase in the use of coffins – as opposed to simply burying the dead wrapped in winding sheets directly in the ground – is indicative of a growing anxiety about the decay of the body. In the late medieval and early modern periods in most of Britain after a death the corpse was watched by family and friends at a wake. Family prepared the body for burial, which involved washing and wrapping the whole body, including the head, in a winding sheet, before putting it into the ground. The earth would then be scattered directly onto the wrapped body, as the Book of Common Prayer implies (Gittings 1984:114). Over the second half of the eighteenth century in much of Britain, particularly in southern and urban areas, the wake declined in importance. Instead, the body was viewed just before burial, after it had been privately prepared and positioned in the coffin. This points to a considerable change in sensibilities. I will argue here that funerary practices from the late eighteenth century represent attempts by the bereaved actively to pursue and construct emotional and highly individualised relationships past the point of death. The body of the dead individual is central to this process.
MORTAL BODIES

According to Shilling (1993) the death of the body constitutes a moment of crisis in a late modern society for two reasons. First, one’s own body is understood as “a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual’s self-identity” (Shilling 1993:5). Death necessarily represents an unavoidable defeat of that project. This makes the confrontation with personal mortality a focus for numerous strategies of avoidance and mitigation. Second, the fragility and insignificance of the body in the face of death is particularly difficult for modern Westerners because of the decline in religious faith (1993:18) and the consequent absence of a meaning-structure which makes sense of human mortality.

This chapter takes a slightly different line. I aim to show that the death of the body became problematic long before any widespread decline in religious faith, and it was rather the changing significance of the unique and identified body which precipitated an anxiety about death. By shifting the focus from the death of the self to the death of the beloved other, I suggest that a corporeal understanding of individual and personal relationships has contributed significantly to the crisis of mortality in the modern period – understood historically to mean the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Shilling’s discussion of death, as in many other sociological discussions (e.g. Giddens 1991, Baumann 1992, Mellor and Shilling 1993), it is the anticipation of personal mortality which is the focus of discussion. However, because corpses are usually prepared and disposed of by their surviving kith and kin, archaeology can be more concerned with how people respond to the death of another (‘thy death’, sensu Ariès 1981), rather than personal contemplation of one’s own mortality. (It is worth noting at this point, however, that, notwithstanding the archaeological commonplace that “it is the living who bury the dead”, the wishes of, or respect for, the dead are often very significant in determining funerary practice).

In the individualistic society of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century west, emotional and unique bonds with meaningful others – notably marriage partnerships and close familial relationships – are central in the construction of self. Individual being is understood as ‘being for’ another (Levinas 1981 [1974], discussed in Bauman 1992:42). By the same token, unique and highly differentiated selves are necessary to the formation of close relationships. The body is the locus of the loved individual, the place where the distinct and personal identity of the beloved inheres. The death of the body – and the processes which follow it – therefore present a major challenge to the surviving lover (I mean this term broadly to include parents, children, siblings and close friends as well as romantic or sexual partners).