Speaking with the Dead: Antiquarian Sepulchral Studies and Literary History

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Stephen Greenblatt brought "new historicism" fully into the foreground of literary studies in 1988 with the memorable opening line of his *Shakespearean Negotiations*: "I began with the desire to speak with the dead" (1). Greenblatt's "desire to speak with the dead" has since served as a something of a ready shorthand for characterizing new historicists' commitments to historical contextualization as a key facet of literary studies. Such commitments have likewise led new historicism's critics to level the complaint that Greenblatt's desire to speak with the dead reintroduced a baleful antiquarianism into literary studies. To some extent, the classification of new historicism as a species of antiquarianism is fair; Greenblatt's memorable line, in fact, echoes the seventeenth-century antiquary John Aubrey's (1626-1697) articulation of his own then-new method for understanding the past, first formulated as a response to England's stone henges. Convinced that the henges were older than his contemporaries thought and interested in the possibility that they had been built to serve as sepulchral monuments, Aubrey insisted that the henges should be allowed to "speak" for themselves—and the task of the antiquary was simply to document what the old stones purportedly had to say (*Monumenta* 1:32). More than a century later, the antiquary John Strange would affirm this sentiment as the crux of antiquarianism: "monuments of antiquity speak for themselves, *dum tacent, clamant*" (26).

Nevertheless, as this essay will suggest, it is inaccurate to isolate new historicism as the lamentable cradle of an antiquarian revival in contemporary literary studies. In 1949, René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* popularized New Criticism by declaring academic literary scholarship as it was then practiced to be "mere antiquarianism": overly concerned with historical and philological minutiae rather than aesthetic judgment (285). As Wellek explained in 1978 in an essay he penned for *Critical Inquiry*, Allen Tate's 1940 essay, "Miss Emily and the Bibliographer"—which likened literary scholars to the titular character in William Faulkner's story, "A Rose for Emily"— had partly inspired his and Warren's critique. In Faulkner's story, townsfolk discover that a local spinster, Emily, had kept the corpse of a man, a love interest she may have murdered, in her bed for years. In Tate's essay, the corpse serves as an analogy for the professor's object of study: the work of literature. "Is it better," Tate rhetorically asks, "to pretend with Miss Emily that something dead is living" or to "pretend," like the professor, "that something living is dead" (450)? Tate sides with Emily, "a somewhat endearing horror," by insisting that the New Critics had established both a theory of literature and a method for its study that honored works of literature as akin to living entities (454).

Yet as Wellek would obliquely acknowledge in 1978, the New Criticism had also come to be castigated as a species of antiquarianism in the years following its rise to preeminence; their critics complained that the New Critics had failed not only to theorize exactly how a work of literature might constitute something akin to a living entity—but also to disclose their own political and religious investments when they insisted works of literature ought to be studied as such. Early antiquaries' sepulchral studies, I argue, lurk underneath these debates about both the nature of literary texts and the methods as well as the purpose of their study. This essay explores, therefore, the intellectual legacies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century antiquarianism by bringing twentieth-century debates about disciplinary methods for literary studies into dialogue with the projects of two prominent early antiquaries, John Weever and Richard Gough, whose

influential studies of sepulchral monuments were criticized for the obsessive attention they paid to details at the expense of addressing the kinds of ethical questions their studies of graves inevitably provoked—as well as the wider political, historical, or philosophical insights such studies might have yielded.

When it came to their sepulchral studies, in particular, antiquaries' methodologies inspired misgivings among their contemporary critics that continue to be legible in the charges that literary-historical scholarship is insufficiently rigorous, on the one hand, or inherently subjective, on the other, and therefore ultimately always vulnerable to the critique that our literary histories are bereft of relevance as antiquarian projects that continue to try and speak, somehow, with the dead.

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