

Comment on the Papers by Colby Townsend and Crystal B. Lake

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Welcome back to the final day of our Workshop on Eighteenth-Century Afterlives. This morning it is my pleasure to facilitate discussion on two excellent and provocative essays by Crystal Lake and Colby Townsend in our Pope and Swift section.

Crystal is a professor of English Language and Literature at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio (perhaps the only university in America named after a bicycle repairman), where she has been publishing extensively on antiquarianism and monuments, presumably as part of a larger project; and she has been co-editing *Vetusta Monumenta: A Digital Edition and Antiquarian Archive*. There is a very good chance that she believes the essay she contributed to our workshop to be part of this larger project.

Colby is a graduate student here at IU. Not content with a PhD in English, Colby is working on a dual doctorate in English and Religious Studies, and has a similarly ridiculous record of productivity, having published, while still in graduate school: one edited collection and half a dozen articles (either in print or forthcoming) on Mormonism, with another edited collection under contract and several more articles forthcoming, in addition to numerous book reviews. Obviously, he needs to stop publishing long enough to complete a dissertation before all jobs disappear. He seems to be under the impression that his contribution to our workshop is about “FX’s popular tv show, *What We Do in the Shadows*.”

As you no doubt recall from our first session, the format of our workshop involves pre-circulated papers that we have an opportunity to read in advance. Furthermore, this format excuses the authors from the responsibility of presenting their arguments orally. Instead, I am granted the privilege of reminding you of the core issues (as I see them) that the essays have raised, and perhaps to direct a question or two to each of the authors, before granting them the opportunity of responding to those questions, or in some other way, attempting to rescue their arguments from my representation. And so, in spite of what the authors may think they have written, we are about to have a session on Pope and Swift.

But first—in the manner of Swift’s *Tale of a Tub*—let us have a digression. The tone, thus far, may or may not prove suitable to our subject; but it certainly is, at best, incomplete. Let me start again, in altogether a different vein. A point of personal privilege:

Death.

It cannot be avoided.

It is not a joke.

It demands to be acknowledged.

The single rose before me, in a small vase like an urn, speaks silently to its presence. Perhaps it might remind you of “A Rose for Emily,” and the liberties Allen Tate takes with that story, liberties Crystal takes as the starting point for her essay.

But it reminds me of my brother, who was passionate and intense about many things, including gardening. Just last week, or the week before (the days currently run together for me a bit), he labored vigorously in his garden, preparing to plant, before coming in to prepare supper for his family and to drop down dead, suddenly and unexpectedly.

I do not garden like my brother. I cultivate weeds with the cavalier disregard of one whose mind is perpetually elsewhere. And yet this year, amidst the weeds that flourish, my solitary rose bush explodes this year with blooms, one of which I plucked and brought to share with you today.

That was abrupt, perhaps even shocking. I should apologize. And I do. But, also, I confess that the abruptness was by design (my rhetorical abruptness, I hasten to add, not by brother's utterly mundane abrupt mortality).

We cannot really have a workshop on "Afterlives" in good faith unless we are willing to acknowledge the utterly mundane—yet, for all that, still sometimes completely unexpected—reality of death. There was never an afterlife that was not preceded by a death. So, as I was reading the essays by Crystal and Colby, my mind remained—at least a significant corner of it—arrested by the sudden and unexpected death of my brother, a departure that leaves not only an emptiness of affiliation and affection, but also heightens my own awareness of being left, the last remaining member of the family into which I was born. Our colleague, Jonathan Elmer, has not been with us during this workshop; and his presence is missed, not least of all today, for his first book when he arrived here was *On Linger and Being Last*, and one imagines that he might have things to say. About afterlives, generally, and about this particular occasion, especially.

In the absence of that Jonathan, I will turn to another Jonathan, and his friend, Alexander, to let them help me through not only this moment, but these essays. I set down my digression and resume my task.

Before wandering over to Colby (and Swift), I want to reflect, in passing, on my brother's widow, who is currently struggling, emotionally and pragmatically with my brother's death. We say "widow" these days, but in the seventeenth, and into the eighteenth century, they said "Relict" – literally "left behind" [notably used of a woman, but not of a man], meaning "relicked, that is: made a relic."

Crystal, your spirit animal will be Alexander Pope; and Colby, yours will be Jonathan Swift:

"Authors, like coins, grow dear as they grow old;
It is the rust we value, not the gold"

--Alexander Pope, *Imitation of Horace Ep. II.i.*

"Whenever I read a book, whether good or ill, it seems to be alive and talking to me."

--Jonathan Swift

Swift is always a good guide, and he can help us here. In Gulliver's Second Voyage, pursued by grim reapers of enormous size in Brobdingnag, Gulliver surrenders to his inevitable destruction "I bemoaned my desolate widow and fatherless children," reflecting in the same breath what "mortification" it must prove to one who had once been a Nardac in Lilliput to die in such a manner. This moment plays with the two senses of "mortification": both our current understanding of shame and humiliation and the original sense of the word--that space of time (from as little as a few minutes to as long as several weeks) immediately preceding death, during which the inevitability which we all resist as part of our daily agenda insists on commanding our full attention. While Gulliver experiences mortification, he survives and encounters in his Third Voyage the Struldbruggs, who never know mortification because they never know death; at first

elated by such a happy prospect, Gulliver soon learns from them that of all the miseries of life, none quite reach the enormity of never being released from it. Swift, of course, wrote more than *Gulliver's Travels*, and his extraordinary April Fools Day jest, now known to posterity as *The Partridge Papers*, he successfully memorialized the Astrologer, John Partridge, while that poor unfortunate was still alive—and trying hard to earn a living by predicting the future falsely:

Here five foot deep lies on his back
A cobbler, starmonger, and quack
Who to the stars in pure good-will
Does his best to look upward still.
Weep all you customers that use
His pills, his almanacs, or his shoes.

These spaces—mortification and memorial—are enchanted spaces, whose power of enchantment arises directly, I would contend, from the awesome presence (defined by absence) that defines them.

Pope, as the epigraph I just cited from his *Imitation of Horace* indicates, shares with Crystal and with his age, an interest in the activities of antiquaries, viewed through a satiric lens. His attitude is not unlike that of the wife, in what I consider to be one of the high points of Crystal's essay, who views the activities of the "Antic-queer-ones" with more than a little suspicion. I am going to contend briefly that Pope helps us understand this satiric perspective as one inextricably linked both to the profound metaphysical miracle of life itself and to the complicated relationship of reading and writing. But to get to that small significant contention, I will need (finally) to do justice to what Crystal actually argues:

It is inaccurate to isolate the new historicists' desire to speak with the dead as the lamentable cradle of antiquarian tendencies in contemporary literary studies. Rather I want to suggest that the sepulchral studies antiquaries conducted throughout the long eighteenth century—and the critical responses those studies occasioned—established the paradigmatic terms that have been used to critique both formalist and historicist approaches to literary studies throughout the twentieth century. (186)

Crystal deploys not Pope, but Earle, as representative of the critique of these sepulchral studies: "Earle is rankled by the number and variety of putrefying objects the antiquary lovingly amasses" (192). Pope details the same objection in the spectacular "Annius/Mummius" episode in *Dunciad* IV, which describes "Mummius, fool renown'd,/Who like his Cheops, stinks above the ground." Antiquarian collectors are susceptible to deception from unscrupulous dealers; and if your antiquarian collection includes a fraudulent mummy, the stench of corruption hangs over the transaction.

Pope did not, however, just write satire; he translated, edited, and wrote critical prose. His preface to the *Iliad* is brilliant on poetic invention, which he characterizes as "breathing the *vivida vis animis* into poetry." His attack on antiquarian extra-textual evidence led him into what we now see as disastrous error as an editor of Shakespeare, but grows directly out of critical investment in a near religious understanding of poetical invention as the power to create something possessed of life itself. For Pope (and Earle, presumably) literary creation was vitally generative, and antiquarian scholarship was deadeningly materialistic.

Colby's discussion of *What We Do in the Shadows* arises from a consideration of genre:

"The series blends several genres together in its portrayal of the vampire household, and two that I will focus on here are the Gothic and the Oriental Tale, which I will further

describe below. These genres have long been productive sites for storytellers to attend to and engage with racial and sexual issues since Authors began writing Gothic romances and Oriental tales in the eighteenth century” (205).

I want to take seriously the pairing of genres that Colby describes, both in relation to Swift and to the enchanted space of death between mortification and memorial. Gulliver’s experience of “mortification” in book two is the generative precondition for the subsequent narrative that at least shares features of the Oriental tale. Moreover, while the first voyage to Lilliput does not explicitly name the precondition as “mortification,” it is explicitly described in those terms, as he swims until he can swim no longer, then surrenders to the current, collapses on a beach and loses consciousness, only to awaken bound in a foreign land—all these events narrated in a single un-Swiftian paragraph that spans five pages from abandoning ship to coming to consciousness in Lilliput. I would contend that this is the defining formal constraint of *One Thousand and One Nights*, wherein marvelous tales of wonder are told specifically to enchant the reader and ward off the pending death that prompts the creative act.

I assume that literally everyone in this room knows more about the Gothic than I do, but if the Oriental tale is prompted by mortification, I would contend that the Gothic is structured by memorialization: the persistence of the dead (or the undead). Others know better than I, but if *The Castle of Otranto* is considered a primary text, that observation holds true; and I suspect if one wants to trace an earlier history, one could go all the way back to *Genesis* as the generative source of Gothic as a narrative of the cursed posterity of the remembered dead, and the demands of that memorialization.

In this fanciful Pope/Swift configuration of Crystal and Colby writing about enchanted space of death between mortification and memorialization, I detect something like a balancing of reading and writing. In that balance Crystal and Pope are concerned with the dynamic of reading—a dynamic where Crystal is less dogmatic than Pope, who wants reading to be a responsible extension of the act of writing itself; and Swift and Colby are more drawn to the possibilities of enchantment and imagination that stimulated by the pressures of mortification and memorialization.

Finally, I want to wonder if these two essays suggest an alternative path to the venerable “secularization hypothesis,” in which the eighteenth century is defined by a long withdrawal from religious belief. There’s a lot of evidence for that hypothesis, but I think it often runs alongside the evidence for “the rise of the novel” and “the rise of democracy.” Both of those rises seem fallen today; and the forms of writing considered here are not novels (indeed, one is television). Is the vampiric afterlife of alternative responses to mortification and memorialization where we are headed? And if so, what forms of social organization will arise in place of what has seemed relatively stable for the last three centuries?