

# LITERATURE, HUMOR AND DEATH IN OLD AMERICAN CEMETERIES GRAVESTONES ON DEATH: WORDS ON LIFE

AURELIO GONZÁLEZ OVIES

Universidad de Oviedo

Death is mankind's most absolute reality and most certain contrary event. And also contrary are the very differing attitudes that man, since time immemorial, has adopted towards the fact of death. Gravestones –at first brief inscriptions, whose gradual evolution eventually consolidated an entire literary genre– therefore constitute an invaluable record of beliefs, reflections and expressions that relate death to the way of life and cultural backgrounds of the deceased. They are usually formal, solemn, laudatory compositions, and are generally in memory of an exemplary, paradigmatic person. However, there has never been a lack of those who, without avoiding such formality, and with simple images of everyday life, have conceived and represented the act of dying with an ironic or frankly humorous grin. Old American cemeteries bear good witness to this kind of epitaph, which is always ready for a bitter smile and a play on words. Such epitaphs have been collected in respective publications by Mann, Thomas, Greene, Janet and Hall, Alonzo.

As outlined in the above title, the funerary epigram –leaving aside those with a votive, honorific theme– has carried out, since ancient times, the task of perpetuating man's life and dating his ineluctable end. At first they were brief compositions, containing no more than a name and an affiliation, and with the precise purpose of preserving the deceased from eternal anonymity. They continued evolving under the influence of various genres, and eventually acquired a literary turn which «comes so close to the elegy that in the case of some poems it may be doubted whether one is dealing with brief elegies or extensive epigrams.»<sup>1</sup> So the epitaph has become a matter

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<sup>1</sup> Del Barrio Vega, M.ª. L. *Epigramas funerarios griegos*. Madrid: 1992. 13.

of praising, on the one hand, the glories and virtues of the departed and expressing, on the other hand, the grief always involved in the loss of a loved one.

The best known and most widespread type of epitaph is without doubt the epigram, which is encomiastic and solemn, and which by means of the elegy or praise of the deceased leads to the panegyric. But besides this ceremonial and honorable funeral poetry in which, through the centuries, clichés and commonplaces have abounded everywhere, we find another kind of composition which, without lacking the basic ingredients of the paradigm –a call to the passer-by, styles of greeting, the immortality of memory, a request for eternal rest and so on– have altered themes and lightened their inflection so as to transmit a less grave and severe vision of the last but most certain reality of mortals. The ingredients of the paradigm are still present because this type of composition transfers to artistic creation the same worries, doubts and reflections about the fleeting nature of life and the unavoidable presence of death, but almost always with a less «religious», more ironic and frankly sarcastic perspective. It is the same grief, but admixed with mockery. It is the same bitterness, but softened with a comic vein.

Old American cemeteries, as we shall see, and as roadsides had been in antiquity, are good messengers of the culture of communities; for cemeteries –those silent spaces on the outskirts of cities where stones lie for century after century, covering death and helping us to discover life– speak to us of beliefs and faith, rites and customs, ways of being and patterns of behavior, of past generations and their history. Even though most monuments obviously involve remembrance, cemeteries may be defined as monuments of memory.

And those same cemeteries which we are dealing with today are at the same time an irrefutable testimony of literary compositions which instead of communicating fear of death have managed to demystify it with expressions in which ridicule and bitter-sweet feelings converge. The Christian religion has not managed to focus on it with such nonchalance. The following analysis will be based on the interesting anthologies of Hall, Alonzo. *Grave Humor*. Charlotte: Santa Barbara, 1962 and Mann, Thomas / Greene, Janet. *Over their dead bodies*. Brattleboro: Vermont, 1962, which include representative examples of epitaphs from cemeteries in Vancouver, New Jersey, Alabama, Colorado, Montana, and Missouri, among many others. These compositions are the subject of the present study due both to their type and their contents, and they almost always mention the name of the deceased, which is a main ingredient of the commemorative essence of the funeral epigram. There are few cases of decisive anonymity, which express a sentiment such as the one in this epitaph from Hartford (1882) –somewhere between a sarcastic remark and a reprisal:

Those who cared for him while living  
will know whose body is buried here.  
To others it does not matter.  
(Mann no. 184, 87).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The number and the page of the composition are indicated where necessary.

Another explicit and direct retaliation at curious readers may be found on a grave in Stowe:

I was somebody.  
Who, is no business  
of yours.  
(Mann no. 185, 87).

## 1. SENTENTIOUS EPITAPHS

There are many epitaphs which, influenced by similar genres, try to teach us a moral lesson, based on a whole range of ideas and beliefs about human existence. They are brief messages, usually put into the mouth of the deceased, which warn us of the universality of death, which must not be forgotten, as life and death are common to all mortals, as in a marketplace where –in any street, town or city– we must all meet, as is suggested in the metaphor of the inscription to Sarah Byfield (Norwich).<sup>3</sup> Examples such as the following express this idea in a simple and direct way:

Josiah Lyndon  
Died Augt 8 1709  
  
Behovld and See  
For as I am Soe shalt Thov Bee  
But as Thov Art  
Soe Once Was I  
Bee Sure Of This  
That Thov Must Dye.  
(Mann no. 10, 6).

With an address to the reader, a formula which heads most classical epitaphs, we receive confirmation of the irreversible mortality of mankind and all our attributes from Henrietta Maria Bray, from Norwich (England):

Here, Reader, you may plainly see,  
That Wit nor Humour here could be  
A Proof against Mortality.  
(Hall 29).

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<sup>3</sup> Death is a market where all must meet, / it's found in every city, town, and street. / If we our lives like merchandise could buy, / the rich would ever live, the poor alone must die. (Hall, 68).

Life is truly no more than a passing gift, a loan whose expiry date we ignore, but it is a debt which must be met on death, just as Plato, Euripides and many other classical authors had affirmed. This idea is reflected in the words of Lucina, from Surry (New Hampshire):

In Memory of miss  
Lucina willcox, who  
Died May 7th 1800  
aged 20 years.

Death is a debt  
by nature due;  
I've paid my shot  
And so must you.  
(Mann no. 75, 36).

Dying is a serious truth, and living is a joke, as is demonstrated by all our lives together and as the writer Thomas Gay (Westminster Abbey) left engraved for posterity:

Life is a jest, and all things show it;  
I thought so once, and now I know it.  
(Hall 11).

Our existence is always on a tightrope and death is always near. In the same moment that our lives begin, we start to die.<sup>4</sup> Time flies and a certain end is unsure, which sometimes implies the philosophy of enjoying each moment as if it were the last, far from vain desires and ambitions which distance us from the true joy of living:

Reader, I've left this world, in which  
I had a world to do;  
Sweating and fretting to get rich:-  
Just such a fool as you.  
(Hall 68).

And this is the only true and lasting honor, and consequently the most comforting merit –and in this respect there has been no change in life or times nor origins or races– this is the true eternity for that common, endless night which is

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<sup>4</sup> Words on the tomb of Lilly Wilson (Plymouth), who died 3 April 1809, at the age of 68: Our life is ever on the wing / and death is ever nigh / the moment when our lives begin / we all begin to die (Hall. 68).

achieved thanks to a wholly tranquil conscience. These are the words with which the family of F. Freeman (Plymouth) expresses its affection on the stone of Nancy Williams, an African servant, and the epigram contains less racism than we are accustomed to on a daily basis:

Honour and shame from no conditions rise:  
Act well your part –there all honour lies.  
(Mann no. 123, 58).

## 2. MEN'S EPITAPHS

Epigrams dedicated to masculine personalities tell us about honor and impeccable conduct, conformity to the way of the world, temperance and serenity of spirit. In that of James, who died in 1821, we read:

This modest stone, what few vain marbles can,  
With truth may say, here lies an honest man.  
Calmly he looked on either life, and here  
Saw nothing to regret; nothing there to fear.  
(Mann no. 111, 53).

There are also many inscriptions which, without adjectives or biographical references, simply aim to express an ideology or a stoic conception of life as a transition to true permanence in the hereafter. The ingenious inscription of John Hyde is representative:

Here lies John Hyde;  
He first liv'd, and then he died;  
He dyed to live, and liv'd to dye,  
And hopes to live eternally.  
(Hall 62).

And in a graveyard in Savanna, we find the «grave» gravestone of P. Fell, which lists briefly:

A Republican  
A consistent politician  
And strictly honest man.  
(Hall 86).

Others, without sparing the work of the engraver or leaving a space for humility, prepare or express a true *curriculum vitae* for eternal life. That of Tomas Bailey could not say more in less space:

Thomas Bailey:

	A most desirable neighbor,
A painfull preacher,	A pleasant companion,
An eminent liver,	A common good,
A tender husband,	A cheerful doer,
A careful father,	A patient sufferer,
A brother for adversity,	Lived much in little
A faithful friend,	time.

A good copy for all survivors.

Aetat. 35

He slept in Jesus ye 21<sup>st</sup> of Jany 1688

(Hall no. 4, 3).

### 3. WOMEN'S EPITAPHS

In epitaphs dedicated to women, without much variation from classical examples in which it was usual to underline a long series of domestic qualities such as *lanifica, pia, pudica, casta, domiseda, pudens*, etc.,<sup>5</sup> there is an emphasis on fidelity, affability, kindness and perfection as a mother, love for the family, sweetness towards relatives and so on, as appears on a gravestone in Massachusetts, with reference to a young woman whose name is not mentioned:

She was an affectionate Wife, a dutiful  
 Daughter, a happy mother, a kind and sincere  
 Friend. Alas sweet Blossom short was the  
 Period that thy enlivening virtues contributed  
 To the Happiness of those connections,  
 But O how long have they to mourn the loss of  
 So much worth and Excellence.  
 (Mann no. 121, 57).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Sec F. Plessis. *Épitaphes*. Paris: 1905. 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. no. 165 and no. 168.

An example of male-chauvinist commemoration of female virtues, if ever there was one, and a confirmation of the idea that literature reflects its historical context, is the brief epitaph to be found in Boston, which reads:

She looked well after the hogs, the chickens,  
And cows, and always kept my socks darned.  
(Hall 1).

But there is no lack of examples of other kinds, which just seek to create word-plays and witticism, without showing any consideration or being specific, although they often reveal more than they hide:

Mary Anne has gone to rest,  
She now sleeps on Abraham's breast;  
It's mighty fine for Mary Anne  
But not so good for Abraham.  
(Hall 9).

#### 4. EPITAPHS FOR THE YOUNG

Epigrams about young people, as had already been shown in classical times, constitute a good opportunity, based on the common idea of *immatura mors*, to express one of the deepest pains, due to the fact that nature neither follows its natural course nor respects its own laws. The aptitudes most frequently remembered by survivors are youth and beauty, meekness and hope, or calmness and happiness. A gravestone in Plymouth (Mass.) celebrates the memory of a girl aged eight by playing with such epithets:

As young as beautiful! And soft as young.  
As gay as soft; and innocent as gay!  
(Mann no. 84, 39).

And in North Carolina we find the cliché of the *puer senilis*, the young old man, a talented individual who already showed signs of good conduct and exceptional qualities which are normally associated with older people. The comparison, which is taken from nature, is as follows:

This was a child that showed the man  
As morning shows the day.  
(Hall 38).

The image of the flower, as a symbol of ephemeral beauty and as a metaphor of tenderness cut down before its time, like a bud which shines in the morning but is broken by nightfall, has always appeared on gravestones. These verses from a cemetery in Wilmington are an example:

Ere sin could blight  
 Or sorrow fade  
 Death came with friendly care  
 The opening bud to heaven conveyed  
 And bade it blossom there.  
 (Hall 101).<sup>7</sup>

Other examples of expressions which allude to the same semantic field are as follows:

- Another sweet flower blossoms in heaven
- A finer bud of promise never bloomed
- Budded on Herat to bloom in heaven (Hall 99).<sup>8</sup>

In the same way, parents who are disconcerted by loss and anguish have not ceased to turn to their faith and to find support in formulas of self-consolation which have come down to our times from a maxim attributed to Menander. I refer to the saying that «those who the gods wish to have close to them die young», which we find in a cemetery in Greenville, among others:

– Those whom God loves die young  
 (Hall 99).

The same fundamental idea, a mixture of resignation and brilliance, is expressed in the following distich, which is from a cemetery in Starkville (Missouri):

He couldn't get what he wanted from us;  
 So he went to Jesus.  
 (Hall 99).

<sup>7</sup> For common sayings in ancient times see Lier, B. «*Topica carminum sepulcralium latinorum.*» *Philologus*, (1903): 445-477 y 563-603; 1904: 54-65; especially 456 ff.; Boyancé, P. «*Funus acerbum.*» *Revue des Études Anciennes* 54 (1967): 275-289. Also my own study: *Poesía funeraria latina (Renacimiento Carolingio)*. Oviedo: 1995, 249-276.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Carmina Latina Epigraphica* 216, 58; 961; 1040; 1064; 1607; etc.

However, there are those who avoid all kinds of euphemisms and, going beyond wit, give a sarcastic, explicit description, or possibly even one which contains fervent emulation:

Here lies a virgin with her babe  
Resting in her arms.  
(Hall 19).

There are also those who value the prematurely lost being in terms of pain and dollars, but not without suggesting, between the lines, a Christian vision of life as a valley of tears:

Here lies our darling baby boy  
He never crys nor hollers  
He lived for one and twenty days  
And cost us forty dollars.  
(Mann no. 71, 35).

And there are others who compare the magnitude of the unhappy fate and greatness of the dead person with the insignificance of the scatological cause of death, as found in an example from Portland (Maine):

The little hero that lies here  
Was conquered by diarrhea.  
(*Id.* 99).<sup>9</sup>

## 5. LOVE AND MARRIAGE

We have already seen how, after death, both spouses wish to leave a sign of their reciprocal affection –or sometimes incompatibility– whether it is the wife toward her husband or the husband toward his wife. Faithfulness in marriage, love for their children, constancy, affection, mutual respect, descendants: these have always been some of the most frequent themes of epitaphs. An example may be found in Boston, where a son perpetuated the memory of his parents:

Josiah Franklin  
And  
Abiah his wife,

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<sup>9</sup> See also Mann no. 55, 29 and no. 115, 55.

Lie here interred,  
 They lived lovingly together in wedlock  
 Fitty-five years.  
 And without an estate or any gainful employment,  
 By constant labor and honest industry,  
 Maintained a large family comfortably,  
 And brought up thirteen children and seven  
 Grandchildren reputably.  
 From this instance, reader,  
 Be encouraged to diligence in thy calling,  
 And distrust not Providence.  
 He was a pious and prudent man;  
 She a discreet and virtuous woman.  
 Their youngest son,  
 In filial regard to their memory,  
 Places this stone.  
 (Mann no. 21, 10).<sup>10</sup>

But there is also an abundance of humor and anecdotes, or rather intimate domestic strife, I would dare to say, with the mediation of hyperbole; there is always someone ready to reserve his final homage until the last moment:

Ma loved Pa  
 And Pa loved women;  
 Ma caught Pa with one in swimmin';  
 Here lies Pa.  
 (Hall 9).

Others express the testimony of their past and their posthumous wishes for an immortal future and heavenly peace, since their life together on earth cannot have been very pleasant, as may be gathered from a gravestone dedicated to Elisa Philbrook and Sarah, in Sargentville (Maine):

Beneath these stones do lie,  
 Back to back my wife and I!  
 When the last trumpet the air shall fill  
 If she gets up, I'll just lie still.  
 (Hall 33)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> For anything concerning family life through epitaphs in ancient times, see Galletier, E. *Étude sur la poésie funéraire romaine d'après les inscriptions*. Paris: 1922. 116 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. those on pages 32, 36, 43 y 44.

Others, with two names and four words engraved in marble, posthumously and ambiguously quantify the reproaches which were stored up and repressed in life: this epitaph is from Hardwick:

	Marshall	
	Willie	She
	1872-1944	Alwais
He	His wife	Did
Never	Della Longe	Her
Did	1876-	Best
(Mann no. 214, 98).		

## 6. OTHER RELATIVES

Thanks to inscriptions we also find comments by other relatives, through which we can investigate the morality of the society of a certain period—their beliefs and prototypes of praiseworthy or censurable behavior. On their graves valuable passwords remain for posterity, with a trace of sincerity and poetic spontaneity, which suggest a small neighborhood and hint at the weaknesses and blemishes which have been left behind.

An inscription from Boylston (Massachusetts) pays homage to a certain Jonas Temple and outlines righteous and exemplary conduct as a good, pure Christian, except for those understandable impurities and human errors. It reads as follows:

His private character was pure;  
 Allowing for human frailties  
 His Christian life was unblemished.  
 (Mann no. 104, 47).

In Edwalton (England) we are given a recipe for a long life and the most advantageous enjoyment of the present moment: drink to live and live to drink, just as classical Greeks and Romans proposed in their funeral inscriptions. Criticism is not disguised, and excellent results seem to have been obtained in the case of Rebeca Freland:

She drank good ale, strong punch and wine,  
 And lived to the age of ninety-nine.  
 (Hall 88).

The survivors of uncle Wid (Marlboro) do not repress their feelings either when it comes to recognizing the human qualities of the deceased, or publicizing

his bachelorhood, which seems to have been alleviated by his homosexual tendencies and some rural pastimes:

One of nature's noblemen, a quaint old  
 Fashioned, honest and reliable man.  
 An ideal companion for men and boys.  
 Delighted in hunting foxes and lining bees.  
 (Mann no. 196, 91).

Such dedications and memories are certainly not the most appropriate for a funeral afterthought, but they serve as informers, like subtle, sometimes scathing gossip among the living; see the farewell dedicated to Aunt Charlotte:

Here lies the body of poor Aunt Charlotte  
 Born a virgin, died a harlot;  
 For sixteen years she kept her virginity,  
 A damn'd long time for this vicinity.  
 (Hall 9).

## 7. THE PROFESSION OF THE DECEASED

Funeral poetry collaborates with the history of peoples, as it allows us to examine the social contexts and the highly varied occupations and concerns which are shown on graves. In the eyes of the living, the dead are equal, whether well-known or anonymous, of high or low rank. For ranks do not exist; however, some people may have wished to attain priority among the shades of the dead: all are the same and are nothing, whatever they may have tried to achieve or be above ground. From Peterborough (New Hampshire), the brief curriculum of James Richey gives a warning summary:

A coffin, sheet & grave's  
 My earthly store  
 Tis all I want & kings  
 Can have no more.  
 (Mann no. 92, 44).

That is where it all ends. On the sober letters engraved in marble, moss covers modesty and pride, slavery and leadership, nobility and humility, the most brilliant existences and the meekest beings. Cobblers and doctors, sailors and soldiers, jewelers and fishermen, intellectuals and leaders all finish up in a grave, which may be more or less impressive or showy, but is still a grave –in the same league:

From 1801 (Jaffrey, N. Hampshire) the stone of Amos Fortune tells us –and these reports are of considerable historical value– of his origins and destinations, his distant conditions and his identity as a person, leaving hierarchies aside, and as just another Christian:

Sacred to the Memory of Amos Fortune  
 Who was born free in Africa  
 A slave in America, he purchased  
 Liberty, professed Christianity,  
 Lived reputably, died hopefully.  
 (Mann no. 77, 37).<sup>12</sup>

Captain E. Griffin (Madison), as if he were taking notes in his pocket-book, narrates concisely, in sailing terms, the adventures of his life, as he awaits his last voyage –his meeting with the Lord:

Tho Boreas' blasts and Boistrous waves  
 Have tost me too and fro  
 In spite of both, by God's decree  
 I harbor here below.  
 While I do now At Anchor ride  
 With many of our Fleet  
 Yet once again I must set Sail  
 My Admiral Christ to meet.  
 (Mann no. 26, 14).

The trades of those who are buried sometimes serve as proof that nobody, as classical authors repeated on their tombs with that formula of *mors omnibus instat*, can escape the claws of death, which is levelling and universal, impartial and inexorable. This even applies to one who in his day took advantage of death: in the epitaph of John Fry (Store Churchyard, England), a spark of irony gives rise to wit once more, as we are warned that spending one's whole life among funeral ceremonies gives no prerogatives:

An undertaker, named John Fry,  
 Lies here –who lost his breath,  
 Endeavoring, but in vain, to fly  
 That overtaker –Death.  
 (Hall 60).

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<sup>12</sup> Similar examples may be found in no. 35, 17 and no. 47, 26.

And there are those who prefer to make their point with statistics, revealing the contradictions of this world into which we are brought and out of which we are sooner or later taken. A midwife from Norwich (England) is commemorated in this way:

In memory of Mrs. Phoebe Crewe  
Who died May 28, 1817, aged 77 years.  
Who, during forty years practice  
As a midwife in this city, brought  
Into the world 9730 children.  
(Hall 53).

## 8. CAUSES OF DEATH

On these graves we also find information about the life and its circumstances which expresses, and sometimes denounces, the cause of death: asthma, fevers and shipwrecks. There are many inscriptions which tell of natural, expected deaths, of old age, or of peaceful deaths or violent executions, like the one found in an epigram from Troy (North Carolina):

Edgar Haywood, 1878-1933.  
Murdered  
The murderer shielded by local  
Officers and politicians.  
(Hall 79).

And another one from Spray, in the same state, reads:

Murdered by the State of North Carolina.  
(Hall 79).

Some people, suggesting that censorship and prejudice were the same as we have known in quite recent times, remained faithful to their image until the ultimate consequences, as may be gathered from the words on the bust of Joseph Palmer, in Leominster (Mass.):

Persecuted for wearing the beard  
(Hall 92).

Others are very concise, and with a desolate, orphaned adjective, achieve an ambiguous but emphatic effect:

Eastport. Lorenzo Sabine, 1877  
Transplanted  
(Mann no. 179, 83).

But there is no lack of other epitaphs, somewhat more explicit, in which a touch of humor is quite eloquent; gravestones which consider this a convenient moment to remind us of the circumstantial nature of the world and of our stay in it. They more or less confess to affirming that life is a miracle, and death no more than a slip. We are clearly always on the tightrope, continuously running the risk of taking the definitive step or the final slide:

In memory of  
Anna Hopewell

Here lies the body of our Anna  
Done to death by a banana  
It wasn't the fruit that laid her low  
But the skin of the thing that made her go.  
(Hall. 71).

Easy rhymes for difficult times; but, when all is said and done, witty and very representative words: silent cemeteries, talkative graves; comments on life, stones over death. Humor and love, history and culture, and children and parents are all united by the permanence and testimony of words, even beyond that hackneyed phrase *till death us do part*.

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