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# Live Body, Dead Body, Ashes. Contemporary Cremation and the Ontology of the Dead Body

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Cremation (from the Latin *cremare* – to burn), or the incineration of a corpse, known to humanity since neolithic times as an alternative to the burial of the dead, is one of the main practices used to destroy corpses today. It is particularly important not to overlook this obvious fact in the context of the contemporary ritual of incineration. In contemporary conditions, death has ceased to be *mastered* and is instead *rationalized*. It has taken on a new face and place in social space under the care of professionals and in connection with the newest technology. The active and rational human being of modern times has deemed death and transience to be a problem.

The ideology of the hospital gave birth in the second half of the nineteenth century to the discourse of *hygiene*. The arguments made by some of the first proponents of cremation were deeply interwoven with that discourse. Those proponents were mostly nineteenth-century doctors and politicians who promoted the new idea in the pages of the professional medical journals they published or at international congresses organized in Paris (1867) and Florence (1869). These men of science expressed the need to create new techniques for preserving the dead, emphasizing in particular the hygienic and economic aspect of the problem.

During the second International Congress of Medical Sciences in 1869, Doctors Castiglioni and Coletti proposed incinerating corpses as a method that could replace inhumation. The results of many experiments and great interest in the new method from local authorities, as well as academic bodies in Italy and France, led to the opening on 22 February 1876 of the first modern crematorium in the world, in Milan. Cooperation among many outstanding individuals and associations active on behalf of the cause of incineration led to the organization of international medical congresses devoted mainly to the problem of cremation: in Rome (1871), Dresden (1876), Moscow (1879), Berlin (1890), London (1891), Budapest (1894), Brussels (1910), Dresden (1911), and Turin (1911).<sup>1</sup> The basis for the development of cremation in its current form was agreed upon by the congress in Dresden. The

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<sup>1</sup> <http://cremazione.it>, *La storia della cremazione in Italia* (The History of Cremation in Italy).

criteria required to be met by processes of incinerating remains, largely still binding to this day, were approved at that time.

*The incineration must: be complete, leaving no half-charred remnants; take place in specially constructed ovens, designated solely for the incineration of human remains, that create no harmful gases. Ashes and other residue must be completely white and pure, the cost of the oven should be as low as possible, and the body should be burned in an incandescent current of air, not in the flames of the fire themselves [...] A breakthrough occurred when in 1873 the German engineer Friedrich Siemens (founder of the electronics concern now known the world over as a producer of mobile phones, etc.) built a regenerator oven. The oven could permanently maintain hot air at a temperature of 1000° Celsius, allowing human remains to be incinerated in less than an hour without direct contact with fire and without leaving organic residue or unburned bones [...].<sup>2</sup>*

### **No Crematoriums or No Playing Fields?**

In Poland, cremation became a subject of intense interest after 1905. The first remarks published on the subject were made by J. Horonowski in his article “On Crematoria” in an issue of the magazine *Zdrowie* (Health) in 1907; the next opinion voiced was that of Dr. Walenty Miklaszewski in a 1908 issue of *Mysł Niepodległa* (Pro-Independen-

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<sup>2</sup> A. Majle, “Ostatnia usługa – analiza organizacji pogrzebu,” *Memento. Miesięcznik funeralny*, no. 5(17), 2002, p. 24.

dence Thought). The first person to begin widely propagating the idea of cremation was Wojciech Szukiewicz. In 1909, he wrote a brochure on cremation in which he argued for the need to build a crematorium in Warsaw. After World War I, when Poland was newly independent, the issue of cremation was expounded upon by Dr. W. Janusz (“Kremacja, czyli pogrzebowe spalanie zwłok oraz obecny jej stan na Zachodzie” [Cremation, or Funereal Incineration of Remains and the Current State of the Procedure in the West], Lwów 1927) and Teofil Jaśkiewicz (“O kremacji, czyli pogrzebowym spopieleniu zwłok” [On Cremation, or the Funereal Incineration of Remains], Warsaw 1928).<sup>3</sup> Though incineration has been associated, since World War II, with the mass genocide perpetrated in extermination camps, in recent years cremation has increasingly attracted interest. In the United States, Canada, and Japan it is a normal custom. In Denmark, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the Czech Republic more than half of all deceased persons are cremated. In Poland, the first crematorium began operating in Poznań on 20 August 1993 on the grounds of the Miłostowo Cemetery in the historical Fort 3A, built in the 1870s. At present there are 12 operational cremation ovens in Poland; besides those in Poznań, others are located in Wrocław, Warsaw, Gdańsk, Częstochowa, and Bytom. The number of people interested in this new approach to funeral rites is growing systematically, and nearly 40% of those interviewed in a CBOS survey declared that they had nothing against cremation.

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<sup>3</sup> Majle, “Ostatnia usługa,” p. 24.

One cause of the spread of the practice of burning bodies in European culture was certainly the Church's relaxation of its stance on cremation beginning in the eighteenth century. The thesis put forth by one theologian that burning the dead was "Christian" and did not conflict with the faith was widely disseminated with the consent of Pope Alexander VII. It was not until 1963, however, that the Vatican, due to the efforts of John XXIII, finally lifted the ban on cremation. In the statement on Funeral Rituals approved by the 152nd Conference of Polish Bishops in 1976, we read: "Those who have chosen to have their remains burned must be given a Christian burial, unless it is known with certainty that they made the decision for reasons opposed to the principles of the Christian faith. This is the consequence of the Instruction of the Holy Office of 8 May 1963, *De Cadaverum Crematione* nos. 2-3. This position is confirmed by the Code of Canon Law issued by Pope John Paul II in 1983."<sup>4</sup>

With the demolition of old myths, the arguments advanced by contemporary proponents of cremation fit naturally into our technological and economic values system. The conditions of urban life are often cited in this context, in connection with the absence of available space in graveyards. Graveyards are beginning, in our current era, to cause fundamental problems for larger urban centres, since they take up enormous areas. In England, a popular saying claims that by build-

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<sup>4</sup> A. Dzierżanowski, *Funeralia 2003. Kremacja*, <http://funeralia.pl>.

ing 218 crematoriums, the English saved 600 football fields' worth of space. The following words of Bernard Shaw are thus far from alarming: "*the practice of earth burial, with its cemeteries crowding the living out by the dead, its poisonous slow putrefactions, its risk of burial alive, and its cost, should be forbidden and replaced by cremation.*"<sup>5</sup>

### **Cremation Polish Style**

Cremation effectively alleviates the problem of overcrowded and aesthetically unattractive cemeteries in Poland, where there is often a lack of available space and making new investments can be a difficult task for the communal authorities. Arguments based on economic considerations are thus strongly emphasised. "Burning bodies in an electric oven requires no more energy than using a washing machine for 40 minutes, considering that a great deal of the heat is generated from the burning corpse itself. Losses are incurred only by the cooling of the oven; they are next to nothing if it is continuously functioning."<sup>6</sup> The costs of cremation are additionally compensated by the fact that the coffin used is not a luxurious one, but made from light wood or hardboard, without decorations or metal fittings, and more importantly, the amount of space needed in the cemetery is small and a gravestone does not need to be mounted there.

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<sup>5</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Collected Works of George Bernard Shaw: Plays, Novels, Articles, Lectures, Letters and Essays*, e-artnow, 2015. Online edition, accessed 23 May 2016. [https://books.google.pl/books?id=K1ooCQAAQBAJ&dq=the+collected+works+of+shaw&hl=pl&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.pl/books?id=K1ooCQAAQBAJ&dq=the+collected+works+of+shaw&hl=pl&source=gbs_navlinks_s)

<sup>6</sup> L.V. Thomas, *Trup. Od biologii do antropologii*, Łódź 1991, p. 191.

Burial after cremation can take a multitude of diverse forms. From the classic placement of urns in traditional earth graves or small urn tombs to the increasingly popular practices of burial in columbaria and memory walls with niches for one or several urns. An urn with ashes can, furthermore, be dropped in the sea, or the ashes can be scattered in a Memory Garden. In Poland, although ashes are not supposed to be kept in a house, it is highly probable that people do so nonetheless. The law, aside from asserting an obligation to bury the remains of the dead, leaves the question of verification of burial somewhat unresolved. After the remains have undergone incineration, the urn is delivered to the customer together with the paperwork confirming that the cremation has been carried out. We can therefore surmise that some ashes are kept in the wild, outside cemeteries: in homes, gardens, or scattered in rivers, lakes, or the sea.

The first burial at sea in the recorded history of Polish funerals took place on 27 June 2004. The ceremony was organized on a rented boat by a Szczeciń undertaker. The ashes of the deceased (after being cremated by the Poznań company Uniwersum) were scattered from an urn, in the presence of eight family members, twelve sea miles from shore, at the latitude of Świnoujście. Wreaths and bouquets were thrown into the water at the place where the ashes were scattered. The burial service lasted about four hours. The undertaker from Szczeciń expressed great satisfaction with the fact that his funeral procedure was completely legal, that he managed to

meet the expectations of his customers without breaking any laws.

The laws in place are falling behind changing practices and customs. Ashes, a neutral item in terms of sanitation, pose no threat to humans; hence, new and almost grotesque approaches to funeral organization are continually appearing. The distinct phases of the funeral process are based on principles of propriety and order, bordering on bureaucratic formalism. The time allotted for the ashes is being reduced to a one-act display. The sphere of symbolism is being abridged and its function is no longer central. The lack of opportunities to participate, a popular theme now, is a concern that has recently been articulated. “Undertakers take care of everything for the family nowadays. From preparing the burial to receiving and settling the ZUS burial allowance and taking care of all formalities, even including closing and settling the deceased’s accounts and business, rented accommodations, credit obligations, and video memberships.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Getting “Creamed” Around the World**

In the post-industrial era, death has ceased to be a taboo subject, and contemporary funeral practices, including, in particular, cremation, are witnessing unlimited new possibilities. “In 1994 the Union of Dutch Crematoria introduced a new product on the market – gold and silver medallions – reliquaries, in which relatives

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<sup>7</sup> I. T. Miecik, “Śmierć bez pogrzebu,” <http://poltyka.onet.pl>.

can carry around with them a portion of their deceased loved ones' ashes. The idea for the medallions quickly caught fire not only in Holland, but also in England and France.”<sup>8</sup> When cremation was introduced in Sweden 100 years ago, it met with resistance. Now over 50% of deceased persons are incinerated in that country. For some time, Swedes have also used a new kind of experimental grave using blossoming white rhododendrons. At the plant's roots, barely 20 cm below the ground, a coffin made of corn starch containing the dead person's remains is placed; it then passes through the process of lyophilization or dehydration in liquid nitrogen (also called freeze-drying), and next is pulverized through the use of ultrasound.

The biologist Suzanne Wiigh-Masak invented a method for quickly transforming human remains into a humus rich in plant-nourishing nutrients. This method makes possible full ecological re-circulation in a short time. Instead of dust to dust: dust to blossoming roses, dust to fragrant peas, or dust to weeping willows. “If my method becomes widespread, in the future cemeteries will look completely different from the way they are now”, predicts Suzanne Wiigh-Masak. “Perhaps they will be cherry orchards, tree-lined walks, or gardens of magnolias and rhododendrons.”<sup>9</sup> Her patent has drawn lively interest in various countries, especially in the U.S. In Sweden, long queues for last rites have made funerals increasingly expensive. Not long ago, a certain

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> T. Walat, “I w kwiat się obrócisz,” <http://poltyka.onet.pl>.

lady from Jonkoping designed a cheap coffin made of styrofoam, assembled like IKEA furniture, kept in every house to be put together DOI-style by the dying or their heirs.

Americans are known for the extravagant measures they often take with cremated remains. The deceased's wishes regarding the manner of those remains' preservation (or use) are protected by law in the U.S. and usually fulfilled faithfully by the family. For example, Marvel Comics' Mark Gruenwald desired for his ashes to be mixed with the paint to be used in printing a comic book (the special edition of Squadron Supreme using that technique was released in 1997). The Houston-based company Celestis sent the remains of over 100 people, including Gene Roddenberry, the creator of the famous TV show *Star Trek*, into the earth's orbit in a satellite. After two years, the satellite was to burn up, re-entering the earth's atmosphere. Ocean lovers can send their ashes to the company Sternal Reefs, which creates artificial coral reefs from the ashes and places them in the waters around Florida, while Celebrate Life offers to scatter them by means of a fireworks display. Bettye Wilson-Brokl mixed her mother's ashes with paint and created a series of abstract paintings, which she then gave to other family members as Christmas presents.

The Chicago company LifeGem Memorials, founded by the VendenBiesen brothers, has been in business in America since 2001; the brothers' innovative idea was to

transform human ashes into synthetic diamonds. A Life-Gem is “an authentic diamond created from the ashes of your loved one as a memorial to their unique and wonderful life.”<sup>10</sup> From the human body, 15% of which consists of carbon, between 50 and 100 diamonds of various sizes can be obtained; their production takes about 16 weeks. The process begins with technicians monitoring the level of oxygen during cremation in order to keep the carbon from turning into CO<sub>2</sub>. At a certain point, the burning process is interrupted and the technician collects the carbon that has accumulated in dark powder form. Part of it is preserved and given to the family, and the other part – after being equipped with a sixteen-digit identification number – is sent to the laboratory. Life-Gem offers a special technological approach to preserving a loved one’s existence and a unique way of showing respect for the dead. A diamond – the hardest stone in the world – guarantees a kind of immortality to the person’s remains. “In advertising its services, the company evokes a personalized and individualized approach to human remains, which constitutes the most important trend in the funeral industry at present. A person needs something tangible, since memory is fleeting; thus ‘By wearing a necklace or ring with a diamond produced from their ashes, you keep your beloved always at your side’, as one of the company’s advertisements proclaims. Remains become indestructible, eternal, mobile, beautiful, and in no need of care.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> E. Domańska, “Z prochu powstałeś i w diament się obrócisz,” <http://main.edu.pl>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

## Humic Foundations

Who would not want to live forever? Cleverly constructed technologies, like the complex rituals of the past, are supposed to make us feel better and safer. Such technologies are, however, losing their public significance, becoming a private theatre of death for their users. Paul Virilio has introduced the concept of *global delocalization*.<sup>12</sup> The contemporary human being seeks to lose the sense of place, to find herself “nowhere”; she is a dislocated, nomadic subject. “... [T]he art of today with its interactive techniques has now reached the level of instantaneous exchange between actor and spectator, the final delocalization. [...] The movement of advertising practices is interesting, because it has gone increasingly toward the sidereal and the subliminal, where there is nothing to be seen. Only imperceptible, unconscious sensations, but very effective ones.”<sup>13</sup> Through technological acceleration, in the ritual of cremation and scattering of ashes the body of the deceased person is losing its localization, its place. Its being in the here and now is definitively ending. But is it gaining a chance for *being* dead?

A ritual of cremation that adheres to the norms of contemporary culture emphasizes the destruction, disappearance, and elimination of all traces. Remains are transformed and pulverized with exceptional care after being incinerated, in keeping with the ruling sense of aesthetics. The technology for producing ashes and

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Virilio, Catherine David, *The Dark Spot of Art*, [in:] *VIRILIO LIVE: Selected Interviews*, ed. John Armitage, London: SAGE, 2001, pp. 129, 132.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

placing them in urns is described as a symbolic function of the *sacrum*. Violent intervention takes place outside the centre of our attention and entirely without our participation. The carefully packaged ashes, closed in the urn, become pretty and aesthetically pleasing. The dead body cut off from its natural context ceases to be a concrete object on which attention is focused. The pace of transformation leaves no room for reflection and is adequate only for a cursory examination.

Many sceptics stress the problem of the funeral's de-ritualization, its becoming limited to a purely pragmatic and instrumental activity. The props used in performing a traditional funeral ritual, suffused with grief, are passing in the current reality through a process of atomization and fragmentation. The contemporary funeral ritual, created in a culture of fluid modernity and non-involvement, is being transformed. The confrontation between the economy of time and the specifics of the language of the graveyard has become extremely evident in this context. The distinctions between the spheres of practical and semiotic processes of preservation is gradually being obliterated, and the particular rigors of classical custom become washed away. Death is acquiring a new stylistics in the face of the postmodern crisis of identity.

We find some interesting interpretative solutions relating to the problem of the connection between the living and the dead in Robert Harrison's book *The Dominion*

*of the Dead*. Ewa Domańska has written: “Harrison’s book promotes ‘necrocratic fundamentalism’, which postulates that the living are the heirs and debtors of the dead. Because the dead legitimize our existence, the survival of humanity depends on protecting the departed both in the sense of looking after their remains and in preserving their memory. As we read in the book’s preface: ‘humanity is not a species (*Homo sapiens* is a species); it is a way of being mortal and relating to the dead. To be human means above all to bury.’”<sup>14</sup> Harrison’s investigation centres on what he calls the “humic foundations of our life worlds,” whose contents have been buried in such a way that they can be regained in the future. The humic contains, in its element of conservation, the unfinished history of what has departed. A funeral does not represent only placing the deceased in the grave, but in a broader sense also the preservation, the suspension of the past. These reflections relate to the idea of the shrinking place held by the dead in our memory, the breaking of ties with them. “Left to ourselves” and deprived of the legacy of our ancestors, Harrison writes, “we are all bastards.” He draws our attention to the inscriptive power of the earth and the power of the grave as an initiating force; in accordance with the book’s main thesis of the “humic foundations of our life worlds,” is the most important indicator of the human being’s presence and mortality. In this context,

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010. The original text used Ewa Domańska’s account of Harrison’s work in her article “Nekrokracja” [in:] *Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty*, nos. 1-2, 2004, published in English as “Necrocracy” [in:] *History of the Human Sciences*, Vol. 18 No. 2, 2005, pp. 111–122.

he reveals the problem of the contemporary attempt to escape from death and the scrupulous erasure of all signs relating to the dead. Harrison deals with the vocalization of grief. As he writes: “it was perhaps through grief that the human voice gained its first articulations. [...] it is from the self’s impossible desire to reunite what death has separated that something like the quest for meaning first gets under way. [...] T]he primary purpose of ritual lament... is to master grief by submitting its potentially destructive impulse to objective symbolization. [...] Ritual lament consists in rehearsed and highly formal gestures of externalization whose purpose is first and foremost to depersonalize the condition of grief by submitting it to asset of public, traditionally transmitted codes. By dictating the rules for ‘how one mourns’, ritual lament helps assure that the psychic crisis engendered by loss, especially in its initial stages, will not plunge the mourner into sheer delirium [...] we have the ability to undertake such a task, because human beings are veterans of mourning.”<sup>15</sup>

Harrison drew inspiration for his work from Heidegger’s ontology of death and Vico’s notion that one of the markers of civilisation and humanity is the way we deal with the dead (both with their bodies and the memory of them). “Where the dead are simply dead,” says Harrison, “the living are in some sense already dead as well.” Ewa Domańska, in her review (“Necrocracy”), clarifies: “Lack of interest in the dead and lack of care for them marks the

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<sup>15</sup> Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, pp. 54, 57, 62, 65-66.

decline of culture and humanity, reflecting a lack of consideration for the living and the breakdown of interpersonal, generational, and family ties. These are alarming processes which point to the deterioration of humankind. This is why one of the basic human obligations is the obligation to the corpse.”

Among all kinds of being, Martin Heidegger set aside one particular kind, which he called *Dasein*. *Dasein* is a self-contained whole, meaning that as long as it exists, it is its own limit. “The ending which we have in view when we speak of death, does not signify *Dasein*’s Being-at-an-end [Zu-Ende-sein], but a *Being-towards-the-end* [*Sein zum Ende*] of this entity. Death is a way to be, which *Dasein* takes over as soon as it is. ‘As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die.’”<sup>16</sup> Being-towards-death signifies the existential possibility of *Dasein*. Death creates its most singularly characteristic perspective, endowing it with meaning and opening to *Dasein* its most singularly characteristic chance at being. Being is given together with nothingness, which does not exclude but rather creates it. Turning away from it, however, *Dasein* turns toward light and materiality, escaping from itself. It then appears possible for nonbeing to be overcome through the process of the accretion of forms of being, new, individual subjects. *Dasein* is susceptible to the illusion that production and action will allow it to claim victory over nothingness.

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<sup>16</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008, p. 289.

Harrison performs a reinterpretation of Heidegger's ontology of death as an ontology of the dead. In his analysis, *the idea* of death is a consequence of the dead person. The dead body is one of the most basic human institutions. This gives rise to Harrison's most intriguing idea – his thesis, paraphrasing Heidegger, is that being-towards-death is essentially being-towards-the-dead-person. Looking after the dead person relates to taking care of the fulfilment of the meaning of his being after his death. The dead exist for the living, and endow their existence with meaning. It is because of them that the living, invoking their ancestors, build social ties and create culture. Speaking of the personality of a corpse touches the essence of the discourse of death, in which remains are the final reference.

The reflections I have engaged in herein on the subject of cremation take on particular weight in the context of the contemporary technologization and marginalization of the institution of the dead body. The fact that there is growing interest in this form of funeral rite leads us to contemplate it in some depth and provokes a number of questions. The arguments put forward by its proponents, who stress primarily hygienic concerns, the absence of places in cemeteries for earth burials, and economic factors, simultaneously illustrate the reasons why this kind of approach to the bodies of the dead is spreading. Sceptics, in their treatment of this question, expose the problem of the de-ritualization of the funeral, which has been accompanied by an inclination

toward removing all traces of our dead and treating cremation as a practical method for their elimination. As we should keep in mind, it is “now up to the culture made by and being made by humans to take over the task of linking mortal life with the world’s eternity and to distil (as Baudelaire would have put it) crumbs of solidity and duration out of the impetuous flow of transient human accomplishments.”<sup>17</sup>

**translated by Timothy Williams**

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<sup>17</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Cambridge: Polity, 2003, p. 104.