

Thomas W. Laqueur

The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains

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As the best preserved secret of this world, death has always been a good choice for (re) thinking and writing (both for the sake of education and self-maturing). The problem of trying to shape one's own ideas about death in a comprehensive way, is that one has to take over quite a risk of ending in producing nothing particularly helpful. Probably the best example for this statement is one of the most marvelous tractates on death ever by Bergson's student, Vladimir Jankélévitch (from 1966),¹ in which death is described and analysed in all its important aspects – irreversibility, irrevokability, absurdity – and still, without entering under the shell of its sense and essence. That is why much more success can be claimed by those studies which approach the topic of death and dying with an allegedly less comprehensive ambition. In an incredibly sensitive manner, such an attempt has recently been offered by Thomas Laqueur, the Helen Fawcett Professor of History at the University of California at Berkeley. Born in 1945 in Istanbul, the child of Jewish parents who fled Germany in the late 1930s and, after the war, moved to West Virginia, Laqueur has been well known for his two books on *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (1992) and *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (2003), resulting in the theory of an ancient “one-sex model,” in which a woman would be described as an “imperfect man.”

What Laqueur has done, is one meticulously argued stroll through time and beliefs, highly attractive in its depth and far-reachingness. Departing from the saying of Diogenes that „once he dies, his body should be trown over the city walls to the beasts,“ Laqueur enters the analysis of why this saying has actually never been

1 Cf. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Smrt*, preveo Daniel Bučan (Zagreb: AGM, 2011).

accepted and adopted in human culture. On the contrary, the dead corpse has provoked all but indifference. For centuries, not even scientists or physicians were allowed to touch dead bodies for the education of their students (*Ecclesia abhorret a sanguine*). Even the resting place of the dead has changed throughout history: in the Middle Ages, churchyards were the place to deposit body remnants, while in the modern period cemeteries took over that role. The names of the dead have become important as well: today, not only graves have to witness them, but also numerous museums and monuments, like those devoted to the Holocaust, spread all over Central Europe.

Beginning with a warm essay („Introduction: the work of the dead“), entwining the destiny of Karl Marx’s body remnants and the story of the graves of the author’s ancestors (in Poland and USA), Thomas Laqueur’s book is divided into four parts and eleven chapters, respectively: The deep time of the dead (Do the dead matter?, The dead body and the persistence of being, the cultural work of the dead); Places of the dead (The churchyard and the old regime, The cemetery and the new regime); Names of the dead (The names of the dead in deep time, The rise of the name of dead in modern history, The age of necronominalism, The names of the Great War), Burning the dead (Disenchantment and cremation, Ashes and history).

If there is anything to object, one might feel pity that Laqueur did not include a few more references to his magnificent historical piece of work: just for instance, in 2010, the same Princeton University Press published an important monograph by Mark Johnston – *Surviving Death*² – which might have been helpful to Laqueur’s considerations of the individual perception of death, the incoherency of the afterlife conceptions, etc.

A son of a pathologist performing autopsies, Laqueur quite early gave up to write about „the existential experience of death,“ but got interested in „how death took on social meaning in the past.“ As he himself admits, „a book on the meanings of death anywhere at any time was beyond him.“ And that is why Laqueur has succeeded where many others had not: he opened for us a tiny window on the concept of death and dying without violating historiographic objectiveness or trying to impose judgements or values that no one, really, has a clue about.

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² Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).