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David McAllister
Department of English and Humanities
Birkbeck College - University of London
London, UK

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction: Revolutionising the Dead: Burke, Paine, De Quincey

Two different but overlapping groups were named as 'the dead' in Romantic and early Victorian culture. We might think of the smaller and better known of the two as the familiar dead: individuals who could be named, whose appearance and characteristics could be called to mind, and who could therefore be mourned, or abused, or celebrated, in all their distinctive particularity. This is the group invoked by Hartley Coleridge in his 'Sonnet XII', when he claims that although it is 'good to think of death' it is 'better far to think upon the Dead'. For him, 'the Dead' are 'they for whom we weep' and with whom we might hope to be reunited in Heaven if, like Hartley, we 'credit all the Bible saith'. These familiar dead are also, in this instance, familial:

> Dead is my father, dead is my good mother,
> And what on earth have I to do but die?
> But if by grace I reach the blessed sky,
> I fain would see the same, and not another;
> The very father that I used to see,
> The mother that has nursed me on her knee.[1]

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[1] Hartley Coleridge, 'Sonnet XII', in *The Complete Poetical Works of Hartley Coleridge*, ed. Ramsay Colles (London: George Routledge, 1908), 116.

The poem insists that a heavenly reunion would have greater value if these disembodied dead resembled their embodied selves, and they remained as they were in the memories of the living: unique, distinctive, the 'very' 'same'. This is 'the dead' who have been well-served by cultural historians and literary critics in the decades since Philippe Ariès published his ground-breaking work of thanatology, *The Hour of Our Death*, in 1980; the dead whom Shelley invokes when elegising Keats in *Adonais* (1821) and who haunt Tennyson's lyrics on grieving in *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850); the dead recalled in Victoria's ceaseless mourning for Albert, Dickens's nightly dreams about his dead sister-in-law Mary Hogarth, and Heathcliff's enduring passion for Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* (1847); the dead who returned in ghost stories, were summoned by name to drawing-room séances, and are commemorated in memorial sculptures and epitaphic inscriptions in the garden cemeteries of the 1830s and 1840s; the dead whose hold over the living can only be loosened through the completion of a 'work' of mourning, according to Freud, in an essay written in 1917, while a continent sought to reckon with the loss of its sons, brothers, husbands, and friends.[2]

But 'the dead' also named a much larger but paradoxically less prominent group: one that was characterised not by individuality and identity but by plurality and anonymity. This version of the dead was a crowd, a mass, an anonymous monitory presence, a locus of authority, and a symbol and symptom of the enduring power of the past in the present. They were, at times, described as both community and social group, although to understand them as such was also to acknowledge the implicit threat they posed to their living counterparts, whom they vastly outnumbered and against whose interests they frequently seemed to be opposed. They were linked to religious belief, of course, but in unexpected ways: since the abolition of purgatory during the English Reformation, the dead had not required intercessory prayer from the living. They were therefore a largely secular presence; indeed, as we will see, one of the lingering resentments about the dead was a belief that they provided a link to the superstitions of Catholicism and the pre-Enlightenment past. Above all, and because of the very qualities identified here—their anonymity, multiplicity, and

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[2] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* XIV, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 239–60.

historicity—this was a group whose characteristics were first imagined by the living, and then constructed in their literary and cultural texts.

The first of these two groups of the dead will be more familiar to scholars of the Romantic and Victorian periods. This book, therefore, is about the latter; that unwieldy majority whose oppressive size did not easily lend itself to either the individuating narratives of nineteenth-century fiction or the recuperative structures of formal elegy, but which has nevertheless constituted an 'elaborate cultural construction and a complex social presence' for as long as anyone can tell.[3] It traces a near-forgotten and highly politicised debate in Romantic and early Victorian culture, which focused on the desirability of allowing an ongoing social role to the dead, from its emergence in the French Revolution debates of the 1790s and through the decades that followed. It shows why successive generations argued over the inclusion of the dead in their definitions of the social, how they recruited their affective power to support largely secular and political projects, and the extent to which this wide reimagining of the cultural authority of the dead was informed by revolutionary, reformist, liberal, and conservative ideals. What this book ultimately recounts is a concerted attempt to *unmake* this group of the dead: to eliminate them from the social body, disenchant their physical remains, police their cultural representation, and aestheticise their material traces. And, in so doing, it shows how people in early nineteenth-century Britain sought to both loosen their affective hold over the living and undermine the authority which had been exercised in their name, by church and state, since time immemorial.

Both of these models of the dead—the known familiar and the threatening mass—are invoked by Thomas de Quincey in two autobiographical essays about his childhood. Written in the 1840s and early 1850s, but recalling events which took place in the 1790s, these essays conveniently span the decades covered by this book and thus exemplify the enduring nature of these distinctions through the Romantic and early Victorian periods. They detail, among other events, the deaths of De Quincey's father and two of his sisters. In the first of these, 'Suspiria De Profundis' (1845), De Quincey identifies the affective power of the familiar dead in his account of how, as a young child, he stole into his sister Elizabeth's bedroom on the day after her

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[3] Peter H. Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1. Marshall's book is one of four that have particularly influenced my sense of the cultural work done by the dead, along with Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), and Catherine Belsey, *Culture and the Real* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2005).

sudden death, so that he could look at the corpse that was laid out on her bed. The mature De Quincey claims that his seven-year-old self perceived that the material form confronting him both was and was not Elizabeth, but rather Elizabeth transformed into something uncannily othered: '[t]he forehead, indeed…*that* might be the same; but the frozen eyelids, the darkness that seemed to steal from beneath them, the marble lips, the stiffening hands, laid palm to palm', all testified to her changed status, and could not be 'mistaken for life'.[4] This encounter had both an immediate, and more enduring, impact on De Quincey. Firstly, it initiated a visionary trance in which he saw a 'vault…open in the zenith of the far blue sky, a shaft which ran up forever', which led him into the presence of the divine. De Quincey felt his spirit rise 'as if on billows' which 'seemed to pursue the throne of God' (280), but an encounter with God was denied to him as the divine presence endlessly receded from his view. When he came to and found himself alone in his sister's room, it became clear to De Quincey that the benign and unitary God of his childish imagination was incompatible with the changes that had taken place to the awful, beloved, and complex thing that lay on the bed. 'Some mighty relation between God and death dimly struggled to evolve itself from the dreadful antagonism between them', he would later write, in an explicit acknowledgement of this episode's ongoing significance: 'shadowy meanings even yet continued to exercise and torment, in dreams, the deciphering oracle within me'.[5] It was a formative experience, one that coloured 'all his existence thereafter', as J. Hillis Miller notes.[6] De Quincey himself claims that it 'ran after my steps far into life' and that 'perhaps at this day I resemble little for good or for ill that which else I should have been',[7] and it is clear that the effects of this 'terrific grief' (272) would stay with him into adulthood, shaping the dreams and visions of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* and other writings.

The familiar dead were thus crucial to De Quincey's imaginative formation, but his recollections of childhood also show that the idea of the dead

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[4] Thomas De Quincey, 'Suspiria de Profundis: Being a Sequel to the Confessions of an English Opium Eater', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, March 1845, 280. A revised and extended version of the first section of 'Suspiria de Profundis' was published as 'The Affliction of Childhood' in *Autobiographic Sketches* (1853).

[5] Thomas De Quincey, *Autobiographic Sketches*, in *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. by Daniel Sanjiv Roberts (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), Vol. 19: 12.

[6] J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1975), 18–19.

[7] De Quincey, 'Suspiria De Profundis', 277.

as an anonymous crowd also played a shaping role. 'Introduction to the World of Strife' (1853) describes how De Quincey's elder brother William—a 'wholly unmanageable' child, and author of a fragmentary work on necromancy titled 'How to raise a Ghost; and when you've got him down, how to keep him down'—repeatedly 'thrilled' his siblings with tales of the insurrectionary potential of the dead.[8] He told them that it was 'not at all unlikely' that 'a federation, a solemn league and conspiracy, might take place amongst the infinite generations' of the dead, who would conspire to overthrow 'the single generation of men at any one time composing the garrison of earth'.

> The Roman phrase for expressing that a man had died—viz., '*Abiit ad plures*' (He has gone over to the majority)—my brother explained to us; and we easily comprehended that any one generation of the living human race, even if combined, and acting in concert, must be in a frightful minority, by comparison with all the incalculable generations that had trod this earth before us. The Parliament of living men, Lords and Commons united, what a miserable array against the Upper and Lower House composing the Parliament of ghosts! (27)

Although William's account emphasises the sheer weight of numbers of the dead, their return is a curiously well-ordered affair. This is no chaotic zombie apocalypse but rather a democratic revolution; the overthrow of a privileged elite by a disenfranchised mass whose spies, in the shape of dead 'sham-men' who were 'undistinguishable…from authentic men of flesh and blood', were already walking amongst the living 'and meditating treason against us all' (27). De Quincey thus grew up fearing that revenant fifth-columnists stalked the rural lanes of Greenheys, where he lived on the outskirts of Manchester: another imagination-shaping terror to add to those which he had encountered beside his dead sister's bed. Yet, there is no suggestion that his father or sisters had been recruited into this terrifying army of the dead, or that he himself would one day be pressed into its ranks: for De Quincey, this version of the dead and the other seem not to overlap.

This is partly because both William's account of the dead as a majority and Thomas's comprehension of their threat as fundamentally political bear the impress of the politicised discourse surrounding the dead that emerged in these years in response to the French Revolution, and which is the sub-

[8] De Quincey, *Autobiographic Sketches*, 24; 27.

ject of this introduction. De Quincey goes on to note that Greenheys was the site of class conflict in the 1790s, as he and William engaged in twice-daily skirmishes with local factory boys who objected to their 'aristocratic' dress and manners. Although they were shabbily dressed, these antagonists were not 'absolutely *sans culottes*', De Quincey recalls, in a passage that imports the language of the Revolution to his account of a less cataclysmic antagonism, and thus invites us to understand one event in terms of the other. The factory children were patriotic enough to abjure 'any sympathy with the Jacobinism that then desolated France' but exercised instead what De Quincey describes as a 'personal Jacobinism' that was 'impatient of inequality', which was visibly represented by the smart attire worn by the well-to-do Quincey brothers. By day, De Quincey felt he was at war with proletarian Jacobins, while by night he imagined a revolt of the dead in terms of a parliamentary overthrow by a vast and unmanageable 'majority'; there can be little doubt that his anxiety over the fearful 'majority' of the dead encoded his concerns about the spread of revolutionary and democratising energies from France to England. Why else would a child imagine that the dead might 'raise barricades' and pose a threat to the polity through an army of revenant legislators who threatened to overthrow 'the Parliament of living men'? His familial dead could no more belong to this revolutionary army in death than they would have sided with the factory children in life, and thus remained entirely separate from the threatening majority. The crowd De Quincey really feared was living, not dead.

De Quincey and his brother were not alone in viewing the overwhelming numbers of this 'great majority' as a source of anxiety. 'What enumerator will take for us the census of the dead?' asked the Spasmodic poet Alexander Smith in 1863. Compared to the roads travelled by the dead, 'the most populous thoroughfare of London or Pekin is a desert', he points out, and their number cannot be reckoned.[9] The religious and philosophical writer Isaac Taylor suggests that the afterlife was simply too crowded to contain the 'vast congregation which has been swelling with its thousands daily, during the course of nearly sixty centuries'. The 'pressure' exerted by this 'vast community of the dead, toward the precincts of life, may, in certain cases, actually break the boundaries that hem in the ethereal crowds' and lead to spiritual visitations. When this happens, 'as if by accident and trespass, the dead may in single instances infringe upon the

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[9] Alexander Smith, 'Of Death and the Fear of Dying', in *Dreamthorp: A Book of Essays Written in the Country*, ed. Hugh Walker (London: Oxford University Press, 1914), 46.

ground of common corporeal life'.[10] Harriet Martineau was similarly keen to contrast the size of the two communities by pointing out 'how small a section of the creation is occupied by the living in comparison with that engrossed by the dead'.[11] William Godwin suggests that '[t]o him who is of a mind rightly framed, the world is a thousand times more populous, than to the man to whom everything that is not flesh and blood, is nothing'. Indeed, so great was their number that perhaps 'every particle of mould' in Europe was once 'kneaded up into man, and thought and felt and spoke as I do now'.[12] Edwin Chadwick would later describe the threat that this mould—now recategorised by sanitary reformers as miasmatically hazardous waste—posed to the future of London. Every year, in just 203 acres of ground set aside for burials, the city inters 'layer upon layer' of the dead, 'each consisting of a population numerically equivalent to a large army of 20,000 adults, and nearly 30,000 youths and children'.[13] The inflammatory nature of Chadwick's claim is obvious: the numerical 'equivalent' to 'a large army of 20,000' is just 20,000. Yet the addition of the military reference allows him to portray the dead as a threat to the living: part fifth column, part besieging force. Dickens, too, when writing in his Uncommercial Traveller persona, reaches for martial imagery and envisages the dead as a hostile force whose presence threatens to overwhelm and ultimately displace the living, noting that it is a 'solemn consideration what enormous hosts of dead belong to one old great city, and how, if they were raised while the living slept, there would not be the space of a pin's point in all the streets and ways for the living to come out into'. Not even the modern metropolis would be sufficient to contain them, and 'vast armies of dead would overflow the hills and valleys beyond…and would stretch away…God knows how far'.[14] John Ruskin allows a more positive influence for the massed ranks of the dead when he praises the

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[10] Isaac Taylor, *Physical Theory of Another Life* (London: William Pickering, 1836), 253; 257.

[11] Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838), 2: 227.

[12] 'Essay on Sepulchres; or, A Proposal for Erecting Some Memorial of the Illustrious Dead in All Ages on the Spot Where Their Remains Have Been Interred', in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993), 6: 23.

[13] Edwin Chadwick, *A Supplementary Report on the Results of a Special Inquiry into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (London: 1843), 16.

[14] Charles Dickens, 'Uncommercial Traveller XII', *All the Year Round*, 21 July 1860, 351.

imagination for allowing us to 'bring sensibly to our sight' things that are invisible, such as 'the great army of the inhabitants of heaven'.[15] As we shall see, such heightened and alarmist imagery was typical of a period in which it was widely felt that for Britain to remain economically powerful and politically stable, the dead were a problem that had to be solved.

This consciousness of the dead as a vast and potentially hostile force is fundamental to the human condition, according to Elias Canetti, who argues that the living have perpetually been engaged in 'intermittent' combat against the 'crowd on the other side': a crowd which, as the young De Quincey recognised, is both 'larger and stronger' than the crowd of the living. For Canetti, this rivalry explains the evolution of funerary customs, which originated as a ritualised attempt to prevent the dead from joining the crowd of the dead: thus '[e]verything which happens in connection with the dying and the dead is coloured by the image of the much larger number of beings on the other side whom the dead individual will eventually join'. The living act as recruiting sergeants for this army, ceaselessly swelling its ranks and although they 'resist it as well as they can… they know that their resistance is not much use'. In this ceaseless battle, 'the living are always on the retreat'.[16] Canetti's claims about the mutual and everlasting antipathy between the living and the dead have an undeniable appeal, but are nevertheless overly broad and universalising. Against them we might assert Benedict Anderson's observation about the essentially fictional nature of communities. '[A]ll communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined', Anderson argues, 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.[17] Without the presence of an imagined connection, these disparate individual selves have no basis to assert their connectedness. It is a model that allows Anderson to explain the rise of nationalism and the process by which individual nation-states disaggregated themselves from larger imperial domains: a process that becomes less a remapping of geographical space than of imaginative terrain, and one which allows for the construc-

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[15] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, in *Complete Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), Vol. 5: 72.

[16] Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 76–77.

[17] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

tion of a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (7) amongst people who may be unequal or dissimilar in almost every other way.

One of the assumptions subtending this book extrapolates from Anderson's analysis, applying it to imagined communities shared by the living and the dead. If, as Anderson suggests, the boundaries of a community need only be reimagined by sufficient numbers of people to be expanded in a particular direction, then Canetti's assertion that transmortal antagonism is inevitable, indeed fundamental to the human condition, begins to seem shaky at best. The dead could just as easily be imagined as benevolent and authoritative kin rather than perpetual antagonists: a crowd whose size does not expose the weakness and insecurity of the living, but offers them strength and stability. It must also be possible that a community might choose to reimagine those boundaries, excluding the dead from its psychic and cultural terrain in a process akin to the nationalistic reimaginings that Anderson describes in *Imagined Communities*. It also seems certain that the attempt to reimagine their role must be accompanied by the generation and circulation of new representations of the dead, through which a community can establish and promote this wider process of transformation.

One of my central claims in this book is that just such a process of reimagining took place in the early decades of the nineteenth century, as modes of representing the dead that had served society well since at least the Reformation were suddenly deemed intolerably oppressive by some of the period's more revolutionary thinkers, and in need of renovation and renewal by others who advocated a more gradual progressivism. This, as we shall see, was a process that raised questions about what, if anything, the living owed to the dead; about where the nation's economic priorities should lie during periods of hardship; and about how much authority should be granted to the past in an age defined by notions of progress and reform. Questions such as these were insistently framed in ways that required people both to think about the dead and evaluate their worth. The dead therefore played a crucial but hitherto overlooked role in discussions about political and social issues, although it was a role that diminished as reformers urged and engineered a radical transformation of the social and cultural presence that was allowed to this vast amorphous group. This book demonstrates that whether they were lauded as exemplars or loathed as tyrants, rendered absent by burial or made uncannily present through exhumation and display, the dead were central to debates about

the shape and structure of British society in the Romantic and early Victorian periods.

Revolutionary eras stimulate attempts not only to redefine social relations among the living, but also to reimagine society's connection to its immediate and more distant pasts. This reckoning with history necessarily involves the dead, as both those among the dead who originated the social structure that is threatened by revolution, and those who succeeded them and perpetuated it, stand as symbols of a past whose legacies have provoked violent discontent in the present. The dead are therefore always imbricated with the political and social *status quo*, which explains why revolutionary ruptures are typically accompanied by assaults on visible symbols of the dead's lingering social presence and authority. As the seventeenth-century antiquarian John Weever notes, this is what happened in the aftermath of the Reformation in sixteenth-century England, when a 'barbarous rage against the dead' was unleashed across the land.[18] Unable to attack the dead directly, because their material remains were both hidden from public view and in a constant state of disintegration and dissolution, mobs of zealous protestant reformers had to exercise some ingenuity in their search for suitable objects upon which to focus their anger. They turned instead to symbols of the ongoing connection of the dead to the people and society they had left behind: statues, windows, tombstones, and texts that represented the dead, or which showed them interacting with the living, were toppled, smashed, uprooted, and defaced:

> Marbles which covered the dead were digged up, and put to other uses… Tombes hackt and hewne apeeces; Images or representations of the defunct, broken, erazed, cut, or dismembred, Inscriptions or Epitaphs; especially if they began with an *orate pro anima*, or concluded with *cuius anime propitietur Deus*.[19]

Weever specifies that the outrages were directed particularly against those graves which implied the existence of a relationship between the living and the dead: where the *orate pro anima* inferred that those who survived the

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[18] John Weever, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (London: Tho. Harper, 1631), 50. For more on the effects of the Reformation on the representation of the dead, see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992); and Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[19] Weever, 50-1.

dead were responsible for their welfare, and owed them a debt that could be repaid through intercessory prayer. The particular targets of this campaign of cultural erasure were, of course, partly dictated by the English church's abolition of the doctrine of purgatory which, as Peter Marshall points out, has a good claim to be considered 'the most radical and complete of all the disjunctures brought about by Reformation'.[20] But their assault on the dead also asserted a severance of past from present, and a disjuncture of old ways and new. Destroying material texts that seemed to hint at the connection of the living and dead served a dual purpose: securing the newly emerging, and thus potentially fragile, social and religious order by policing the purgatorial beliefs that might have stimulated counterrevolutionary sentiment, while simultaneously asserting a discontinuity between past and the present through the severance of one generation from the traditions of their ancestors.

A less well-known, but nevertheless comparable campaign took place in the final decade of the eighteenth century, when participants in the pamphlet war that erupted in Britain during the French Revolution sought to reimagine and redefine both the position of the dead in society, and their own connections to the past. The rest of this chapter recounts the emergence of a discourse about the degree to which the dead should, or should not, be considered as members of society, and argues that these disputes encoded commentary on a range of related issues concerning political agency, intergenerational connection, the existence of natural rights, cultural inheritance, and the relationship between government and populace. It thus provides both an immediate context for De Quincey's conflation of the dead with the revolutionary energy of the emerging proletariat, and a necessary background for what follows in the rest of the book.

This discourse first emerges in Thomas Paine's condemnation of Edmund Burke in *Rights of Man* (1791). Paine denounces Burke's depiction of society by arguing that it transforms the dead into tyrants, whose lingering social presence appals the living and strips them of their natural rights. In so doing, he both lays bare the extent to which conservative thought relied upon the cultural authority of the dead to sustain its vision of society and establishes an association between social reform and an attempt to reimagine the role played by the dead in British society. This phase of my argument thus has a twin focus; it simultaneously outlines the ways in which participants in the revolutionary debates of the 1790s understood their culture's connection to its past, and analyses their decision to

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[20] Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead*, 4.

situate their explorations of this topic within discussions about the dead. While the former is largely a question of intellectual history, the latter concerns issues of rhetoric and figuration that require an understanding of the enduring affective power of representations of the dead, and their relation to the wider political discourse of the time. The revolutionary debates of the 1790s were marked by the use of violent language and exuberant imagery by participants of every political stripe—a tone that was established by the rhetorically compelling style of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). The young William Wordsworth, who was yet to publish his first poems, was violently opposed to Burke's conservative arguments in the early 1790s, and offered a memorable image of the dangerous power of his prose in his *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*. Here, Wordsworth offers a backhanded compliment to Burke's prose in the Reflections, which he describes as an 'intoxicating bowl', so potent that unwary readers might find that they have 'business on both sides of the road' as they stagger away from their reading, drunk on its rhetoric. Wordsworth's response was typical of critics who admired yet mistrusted Burke's elaborate and densely layered imagery, and if there is an irony in Wordsworth's use of such an elaborate image to condemn the disorientating effect of Burke's own elaborate metaphors, it is one that typifies a debate in which questions of style, and the ability of language to provoke strong emotion, were repeatedly freighted with vast political significance.[21] This point was made by another (anonymous) disputant in the Revolution controversy who identified the necessity of combining compelling ideas with affective rhetoric when defending Paine's *Rights of Man*, and who complained that the book had been condemned as 'inflammatory, as though there was some danger that the minds of the people would be roused to a sense of their rights' by its content. Although 'men are capable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood', the author notes, '*they will not move till they are made to feel*'.[22] Only then, under the impetus provided by an affective encounter with the written word, 'perhaps they may shake off their intolerable burdens'.[23] Affect provokes action, the author claims, and if a text is to effect political change, it must not only reveal truth but also needs to stimulate the emotions of its readers.

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[21] William Wordsworth, 'A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff', in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), Vol. I: 19-66.

[22] *The Political Crisis: Or, a Dissertation on the Rights of Man*, in *Radicalism and Reform, 1790-92* ed. Gregory Claeys, 3: 149-50. My italics.

[23] *The Political Crisis*, 150.

This affective requirement was shared amongst the most widely read contributors to the pamphlet war and helps to explain the recurring presence of the dead in their discussions of legislative and political agency. Thus, a text such as Paine's *Rights of Man*, which condemns the interests of the dead as being fundamentally opposed to the rights of the living and argues for their effective banishment from all political and social consideration, nevertheless relies upon—indeed, repeatedly exploits—their vast affective power; as we will see, Paine recruits the dead to make the living *feel*. Tracing these competing representations of the social role of the dead in the revolutionary period reveals how what began as a disagreement over legal obligation and monarchical power developed into a dispute in which—to borrow a phrase from Bram Dijkstra—'metaphors [did] the dirty work of ideology'.[24]

EDMUND BURKE AND THE ANCESTRAL DEAD

The status afforded to the dead, their role in society, and their cultural and political legacies, all emerged as points of contention in the pamphlet war that dominated English political discourse during the early years of the French Revolution. All are present—latent and implicit—in what has a good claim to be the founding text of the Revolution Controversy: the sermon given to the Revolution Society in November 1789 by the dissenting preacher Richard Price, which was subsequently published as *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*. Here, Price claims that the king ruled by the 'choice of his people' and that the people therefore had the 'right to chuse our own governors; to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves'.[25] He makes no mention of the dead, but implies that 'the people'—'ourselves', 'us'—refers to that part of society able to make an active choice in the present, excluding the dead from consideration in issues of governance and restricting political agency to the living. This assertion of popular democratic control of the people over their rulers gave Edmund Burke the pretext for his own intervention in the Revolution Controversy, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke spends the first half of *Reflections* attempting to undermine Price's assertion of popular democratic power over the monarchy, and his exclusion

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[24] Bram Dijkstra, *Evil Sisters: The Threat of Female Sexuality and the Cult of Manhood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 311.

[25] Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (London: 1790), 25; 34.

of the dead from political and social consideration. He bases his opposition upon the wording of the Declaration of Right, which had been drawn up to secure the line of succession after the Glorious Revolution that installed William of Orange on the throne in 1688. No such 'right' could rest with the people, Burke insists, because the terms of this declaration placed English society under both legal and spiritual obligations to the declaration's framers. The declaration had been made in the name of the people, and explicitly promised that they would submit 'themselves, their heirs and posterities for ever' to defend the newly established monarchical line of succession. Burke not only considered this oath to be binding, but insists upon its status as 'the cornerstone of our constitution, as reinforced, explained, improved, and in its fundamental principles for ever settled'.[26] It was a position which, as many of his opponents would later point out, seemed to affirm the right of one generation of the dead to restrict the political agency of all successive generations of the living, and so to deny others the rights that the Bill's framers had so recently exercised for themselves. The pamphlet war that followed from Burke's opposition to Price's sermon covered a vast range of political and social issues, but these emerged from a fundamental disagreement concerning the influence of the dead on the governance of the living.

Burke later gained a reputation for demanding that the living should subject themselves to the tyranny of the dead, whose edicts and social structures must be preserved at all costs. This, however, is a mischaracterisation that, as we will see, was skilfully constructed and exploited by Thomas Paine. In fact, the restrictions that Burke places on the political agency of the living are far from being absolute; he allows that the state can be reformed, for example, but insists that any such change should be seen as an 'occasional deviation' from a general guiding principle of conservation.[27] To follow any other course of action would be to risk the survival of the state itself—a risk taken, he argued, by the revolutionaries in France. If their English admirers, such as Price, were allowed to put into practice their belief that the state could be changed 'as often, and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions', they would bring about a catastrophic break in the 'whole chain and continuity of the common-

[26] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell and W. B. Todd, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 8: 67.

[27] Burke, *Reflections*, 72.

wealth'. 'No one generation could link with the other'—a severance between living and dead that would both foment recurring political turmoil and have more far-reaching consequences. 'Men would become little better than the flies of a summer', he claimed, implying that intergenerational connection was so fundamental to humanity that any severance of the living from the dead would bring about a transformation in our essential nature so severe that it would effectively lead to our dehumanisation.[28]

This fear of a cataclysmic intergenerational rupture needs to be understood in relation to Burke's conception of the role played by the dead in his model of society. Burke has frequently been cast, to borrow Steven Blakemore's phrase, 'in the role of the knight of the dead traducing the rights of the living', and his complex understanding of the interaction between distant generations reductively classed as little more than primitive ancestor worship.[29] It is therefore worth taking some time to set out his understanding of what Kurt Fosso has termed the 'transmortal community' before discussing its subsequent reductive, but rhetorically compelling, deconstruction by Paine in *Rights of Man*: the text which first positioned Burke as a combatant fighting for past generations in a battle against the present.[30] Burke saw the living and the dead as co-members of a community that he identifies with the nation. Such a community is 'not an idea only of local extent, and individual momentary aggregation'; indeed, its full extent and membership cannot ever be demarcated, as it stretches both backwards and forwards in time and counts the living, dead, and yet-to-be-born among its members.[31]

Some version of this imaginative melding of disparate people into a coherent body is essential to the construction of national identity.

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[28] Burke, *Reflections*, 145.

[29] See, for example, Mulford Q. Sibley, 'Burke and the New Ancestor Worship', *New Republic*, 12 March 1956, 24-25; Tom Furniss, 'Cementing the Nation: Burke's Reflections on Nationalism and National Identity', in *Reflections on the Revolution in France: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. John Whale (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 134; Peter H. Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 27; Steven Blakemore, *Burke and the Fall of Language: The French Revolution as Linguistic Event* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1988), 21.

[30] Kurt Fosso, *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 6.

[31] 'Speech on Reform of Representation in the Commons', in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* ed. by P.J Marshall and Donald Bryant (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), Vol. 4: 219.