ON EPITAPHS AND NATIONAL CHARACTER

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If style is of the man, as Buffon the much misquoted wrote, and everything a man produces reflects himself, then everything a nation produces throws some light upon its character or mentality. Therefore literature, as well as architecture or costumes or constitutions, mirrors the psychology of the nation. Epitaphs are a form of literature, though they have been grievously neglected by college professors and popular lecturers. They can serve to illuminate the dark recesses of national consciousness and the shadowed springs of political motives.

Without pausing to analyze how the truth can be deduced from the foregoing fallacious enthymemes, our gentler readers are asked to make a syllogism from the Lady Una's remarks in Spenser's dainty phrase:

> We "all forwearied be; for what so strong
> But, wanting rest, will also want of might?"

Mankind has now more difficult and important labours than the Red-Crosse Knight could imagine. Therefore what is so opportunely restful reading for tired and living heroes as epitaphs? They are literature doubly escapist, in that such readers have temporarily escaped the possession of tombstones or epitaphs, and in that the possessors of epitaphs have now permanently escaped all save the inescapable.

Being neither so discourteous as to discuss our near neighbors, nor so uninformed as to need the help of epitaphs to disclose our own psychology, we shall maintain a discreet silence concerning Canadian and American epitaphs. The friendly rattling of closeted skeletons begins with those of our closest relatives, the English. Soon after landing at Southampton, the tourist of the good old time or the soldier of the bad present time is almost sure to be shown a unique example of lapidary art at Winchester. Just outside the aged cathedral, an impressive epitaph teaches both military ethics and hygiene in a memorable mixture of verse and prose. It reads:

> In Memory of Thomas Thetcher a Grenadier in the North Regiment of Hants Militia, who died of a violent Fever contracted

by drinking Small Beer when hot the 12th of May, 1764, Aged 26 Years.

In grateful remembrance of whose universal good will towards his Comrades, this Stone is placed here at their expence, as a small testimony of their regard and concern.

Here sleeps in peace a Hampshire Grenadier,
Who caught his death by drinking cold small Beer.
Soldiers be wise from his untimely fall,
And when ye're hot, drink Strong or none at all.

This memorial being decayed was restored by the Officers of the Garrison A.D. 1781,

An honest Soldier never is forgot
Whether he die by Musket or by Pot.

This Stone was placed by the North Hants Militia when disembodied at Winchester on 26th April, 1802, in consequence of . . .

But the final line is illegible, worn by more than a century of lush grass. Should any twentieth century soldier fail to heed that companionate admonition, let him recall the terse Latin inscription in Winchester College: *Aut disce aut discede; manet sors tertia—caedi.* In these days of crisis, the young Anglo-Saxon warrior must apply to himself personally the vivid translation: "Learn, leave, or be licked."

If, as the Duchess in Wonderland told Alice, everything has a moral if only you can find it, then surely, even before the gentler reader has penetrated thirteen miles inside Britain, he has learned from one epitaph that the outstanding qualities of the English nation are solidarity, good-will, faithfulness, jovial fellowship, humor, and the didactic temperament. Then the college motto adds discipline to the list of virtues. Lest it be objected that this inductive reasoning is based upon only one or two examples, more epitaphs will now be quoted of somewhat drier but no less genuine character.

Bath Abbey exhibits (or exhibited before being bombed) a wealth of inscribed tablets, to appreciate justly whose frigid classicism, pompous yet appropriate, Beau Nash must be introduced. After Oxford, law study, and army experience, the famed "arbiter of elegance" became the Master of Ceremonies at the Assembly Rooms of Bath. His influence greatly improved the manners of those who, in the words of Horace Walpole, "went there well and returned home cured" after drinking the waters of the three hot mineral springs. Beau Nash made and posted his eleven "Rules A.D. 1707, by General Consent Determined"; some of these read as follows:

That no Gentleman give his Tickets for the Balls to any but Gentlewomen. N. B. Unless he has none of his Acquaintance.—That all whisperers of Lies and Scandal be taken for their Authors.—That all Repeaters of such Lies and Scandal be shun'd by all Company, except such as have been guilty of the same Crime.

Thus at this gay resort of political, literary, and social notables Samuel Johnson could describe the Thrales and Fanny Burney as "Bath Belles tripping lightly over the hot pavements in cork soles and a clear conscience", and Miss Elizabeth Linley could carry on with Richard Brinsley Sheridan the most romantic of courtships, and—but that is another story, and it must not intrude into a solemn survey of epitaphs. For Bath Abbey is richer in monuments than any other English church except Westminster Abbey; as the "devoted physician and graceful poet" wrote:

These walls so full of monument and bust
Show how Bath waters serve to lay the dust.

It was this same Dr. Harrington who wrote the following epitaph for Beau Nash, when he died in poverty and was buried at the expense of the Corporation:

Adeste O Cives, adeste lugentes!
Hic silent Leges
Ricardi Nash Armig.
Nihil amplius imperantis
Qui diu et utilissime
assumptus Bathoniae
Elegantiae Arbiter
Eheu!
Morti (ultimo designatori)
haud indecore succubuit:
Ann: Dom: 1760 *Aet suae* 87
Beatus ille qui sibi imperiosus!

If social Virtues make remembrance dear,
Or Manners pure on decent rule depend,
To His remains consign one gratefull Tear,
Of Youth the Guardian, and of All the Friend.

Now sleeps Dominion, Here no Bounty flows;
Nor more avails the Festive Scene to grace
Beneath that Hand which no discernment shows
Untaught to honour or distinguish place.

Lest the unlearned or undiscerning reader judge the Latin by the dwindling poetic art of the later verses, a literal translation is here appended:

Oh come, ye citizens! Oh come, ye mourners!
Silent now are the laws of
Richard Nash, Esq.
Giving no further orders,
Arbiter of elegance,
Who for a long time and indeed most beneficially
Reigned at Bath.
Alas!
To death (the last master of ceremonies)
He by no means unbecomingly surrendered.
A.D. 1760; 87 years old.
Blessed is he who has command over himself.

What essential English qualities does this epitaph exhibit? Respect for law, love of order, sense of decorum, self-control, regard for good manners, respectability, interest in youth and friendship, good government, a feeling of honor and decent respect for rank and position. To add to this picture of the British character, consider the opposite sort of eighteenth century celebrity, the recluse poet Thomas Gray. Family love and filial piety are the obvious morals of his epitaph. That is, the one he wrote in his own person, not the three stanzas in his Elegy, the pastoral disguise for himself, whom "melancholy marked for her own", and who "gained from heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend." Inside the churchyard of Stoke Poges with its yew tree and rugged elms, by the east end of the church, stands a plain vault for Gray's mother and aunt, on which the poet commemorated "Dorothy Gray, widow, the careful tender mother of many children, one of whom alone had the misfortune to survive her."

Another rural churchyard of idyllic sanctity but simpler design shelters one of Gray's successors in the poetic art. Up north in the English Lake Country, in the far corner of Grasmere cemetery, the little river Rothay babbles constantly with a monotonous cheer as its clear waters ripple among the stones below the churchyard wall. Just the place for a poet laureate to rest in peace! Wordsworth's stone here bears his name and dates only. But inside Grasmere Church is his memorial tablet, on which Thomas Woolner sculptured a relief portrait of the poet and two simple panels of daffodil and small celandine, of thorn and snowdrops. The epitaph is a translation of Keble's

Latin dedication of his *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* to Wordsworth: "true philosopher and poet who . . . whether he discoursed on man or nature, failed not to lift up the heart to holy things, and tired not of maintaining the cause of the poor and the simple."

In that inscription are suggested many more of the English virtues. Love of philosophy and poetry, love of nature, a desire for holy things, a tireless championship of the poor people and of the common man. If evidence be sought from epitaphs to show the love of liberty, humanitarianism and manliness in the British Isles, consider the Latin epitaph of Jonathan Swift, over the doorway in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. It says: "Here Jonathan Swift, for thirty years Dean of this cathedral, lies, where fierce indignation can no longer rend his heart. Go, traveller, and imitate, if you can, the strenuous avenger of Liberty for mankind."

Any discussion of epitaphs must, of course, include some reference to William Shakespeare. The common quatrain on the stone floor of the chancel in Trinity Church, Stratford-on-Avon, cursing the one who moves his bones, was used merely for safety first; it doubtless referred to the old custom of transferring bones to the Charnel House to make room for new burials. His real epitaph is in Latin and English inscriptions near his bust on the wall, lines complimentary enough to satisfy any Ben-Jonsonian lover "on this side idolatry":

Iudicio Pylium, genio Socratem, arte Maronem
Terra tegit, populus maeret, Olympus habet.

Logic, if not prosody, would suggest Sophocles as the ancient parallel for a dramatist, rather than Socrates; but the epitaph reads Earth covers, the nation mourns, Olympus has, him who was a Nestor in wisdom, a Socrates in genius, a Vergil in art. The six English lines that follow are even more laudatory, and less distinguished in style.

For exquisitely artistic praise, St. Paul's offers about the most famous epitaph in Britain. The architect of London's cathedral and of no fewer than fifty-four other churches after the Great Fire in 1666, Sir Christopher Wren, is commemorated inside St. Paul's above the door of the north transept. His epitaph is a gem of dignity and charming propriety: *Lector, si monumentum requiris, circumspice.* Reader, if you would seek his monument, look around you!

The greatest example of efficiency in epitaph writing—a memorable inscription to show genuine praise and tender feeling—is in four words whose inspiration is unknown except for the date, 1688. "Jane Lister, dear Childe," reads a stone in the cloister of Westminster Abbey. Another brief epitaph is "O rare Ben Jonson," in the nave, or rather the north aisle.

When a Scotsman wishes to say much but save his words, he too can do it cleverly. Robert Burns's volume of poems includes a subtle couplet inscribed also on a tombstone in St. Michael's churchyard at Dumfries, here with the victim's full name rather than his initials only, but without the poet's name:

> Here lies John Busby, honest man.
> Cheat him, Devil, if you can.

Doubly Scottish is this epitaph, for it shows both the national economy in words and the business of the deceased. What a fine old custom to inscribe the trade or profession on each man's tombstone, to label him distinctly to all eternity as a ploughman, a tailor, a fishmonger, a scrivener, a distiller, or in rare instances as a gentleman! What a satisfaction to know that some men even after death were prompt to tell strangers that they really worked for a living!

But alas, the literary charm of the foregoing epitaphs has distracted the reader's attention from their morals. To return to the theme, Burns emphasized the British quality of honesty—or did he? Whatever virtue he pointed out, everyone knows that the British are honest. Not only the men, but the women; they too are fearlessly outspoken even in epitaphs. In Ely cathedral a small brass plate, probably of the seventeenth century, reveals the life history of a candid lady with sterling truth. And, if necessary, it might be said to emphasize the Anglo-Saxon stress on the freedom of the will or choice, and the regard for comfort, especially in old age. The lady's epitaph reads:

> Ursula { Tyndall by birth
> Coxee by choice
> Upcher in age and for comfort.

Such a prosaic inscription contrasts with two poetic gems in Dumfries churchyard. For when all literatures are compared, no language can offer quite so large and varied an achievement in excellent poetry as the English. What universal and lasting effectiveness can be gained by appealing only to the imagination

of posterity! A simple epitaph celebrates "Helen Blake, spouse of Peter Leslie of Edinburgh, who departed this life on the 11th of November, 1818, aged 56 years.

> She was—
> But words are wanting to tell what!
> Think what a wife should be, and—
> She was that."

The other tender poetic gem refers to "Philadelphia Douglas, died February 6, 1754, who lived 31 years, wife of Robert McMurdo." How true to the best style of the eighteenth century, how inclusive and poignant, yet how free from romantic confusion are these lines:

> Nor herb, fruit, flowers,
> Glistening with dew, nor fragrance after showers,
> Nor grateful evening mild, nor walk by moon,
> Nor glittering starlight without thee is sweet.

Such graceful verse may recall Ben Jonson's Epitaph on Elizabeth L. H. (1616):

> Underneath this stone doth lie
> As much beauty as could die,
> Which in life did harbor give
> To more virtue than doth live . . .

Likewise William Browne's *On the Countess Dowager of Pembroke* (1621):

> Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother;
> Death, ere thou hast slain another
> Fair and learned and good as she,
> Time shall throw a dart at thee . . .

Then the erudite memory calls up Walter Savage Landor's *Rose Aylmer* (1806):

> Ah, what avails the sceptered race,
> Ah, what the form divine?
> What every virtue, every grace?
> Rose Aylmer, all were thine . . .

And Walter De La Mare steps into this succession with *An Epitaph* (1912):

> But beauty vanishes, beauty passes;
> However rare—rare it be.
> And when I crumble, who will remember
> This lady of the West Country?

But here the ungentle reader interrupts to ask whether he is to indulge in poesie to escape from life, or to analyze epitaphs to determine national character and mentality.

The English nation has so many virtues, as has been demonstrated more or less conclusively by the quotation of epitaphs, that only one more inscription needs to be mentioned. It is the sincere straight-forward simple tribute to the ideal of unselfish patriotism. It is the epitaph in Westminster Abbey "among the most illustrious of the land" for "A British Warrior unknown by name or rank," to commemorate "the many multitudes who during the Great War of 1914-1918 gave the most that man can give—life itself—for God, for king and country, for loved ones, home, and empire, for the sacred cause of justice and the freedom of the world. They buried him among the kings because he had done good toward God and toward his house . . ."

While English epitaphs seem to be more varied in style and content than those of other nations, ranging from cryptic Latin verse through formal English prose to clever doggerel, so that in true democratic independence each Britisher can have on his tombstone exactly what he wants, or what his survivors want him to have, yet in one respect—length—they are surpassed by many Dutch epitaphs. In Holland the heroes win long, much longer, inscriptions to serve as passports to the memory of posterity.

The neat frigidity of old Dutch churches is relieved by warm praise in voluminous epitaphs on stupendous tombs. Delft ranks high in the splendor and fluent instructiveness of its memorials. There is the most massive epitaph I know, one little short of an encyclopedic biography and sermon combined, that of Pieter Pieterszoon Hein (1578-1629), a naval hero of Delft. But life is short, and that art is a long piece of Latin. So the patriotism of the Netherlands and the qualities of the ideal Dutchman will be here illustrated by quoting the translation of most of a shorter epitaph, one not half so substantial. It is as follows:

For an eternal memorial.
You who love the Dutch, virtue, and true labor,
read and mourn.
The ornament of the Dutch people, the formidable in battle,
lies low, he who never lay down in his life, but taught
by his example that a commander should die standing,
he, the love of his fellow-citizens, the terror of his

enemies, the wonder of the ocean.
Maarten Harpertszoon Tromp,
a name comprehending more praise than this stone can contain,
a stone truly too narrow for him, for whom East and West
were a school, the sea the occasion of triumph, the whole
world the scene of his glory, he, a certain ruin to pirates,
the successful protector of commerce;
useful through his familiarity, not low; after having
ruled the sailors and the soldiers, a rough sort of people,
in a fatherly and efficaciously benignant manner;
after fifty battles in which he was commander or in
which he played a great part; after incredible victories,
after the highest honors though below his merits,
he at last in the war against the English,
nearly victor but certainly not beaten,
on the 10th of August 1653 of the Christian era,
at the age of fifty-six years,
has ceased to live and to conquer.
The fathers of the United Netherlands
have erected this memorial in honor of this highly
meritorious hero.

A re-reading of that dazzling epitaph shows the fine qualities of the Hollanders, such as true labour in battle and on the ocean, bravery, energy, fatherly and efficacious benignity! Practical intelligence, admired and rewarded in the Netherlands, is celebrated in an epitaph, also in the Old Church of Delft, for Antony van Leeuwenhoek, the inventor of the microscope, because "he deserved well of the whole world."

As for women, honest domesticity was no small virtue in the seventeenth century, and it doubtless remains highly valued to-day in Holland, the land where styles seldom change, in rural costumes or in cheeses or in individual liberty. An elegant marble tomb erected in 1611 by her husband to the memory of Elizabeth van Marnix proclaims in Latin: "There is virtue enough in having pleased one husband, which his so precious love testifies."

Pleasing one husband? How simple life used to be! Now the errant memory brings up that much quoted French couplet:

Here lies my wife. How fine
For her repose—and mine!

But did any one ever find the French original of that on a tomb? It is probably only an instance of Gallic wit, for Montaigne told his nation to do everything with gaiety, or rather, discussed gaiety in himself and thereby helped to set the style.

The French genius shows itself less in epitaphs than elsewhere. When the French praise, they do it artistically and with perfect taste, but not so much on tombstones as in ceremonies, in books, in addresses before the French Academy, in conversation, in the pictorial arts, even in musical "homages".

The French have so long observed "le juste mésure", the Greek desire of moderation, the French passion for precise truth, that their classic restraint and scientific accuracy almost defeat the purpose in an epitaph. For instance, Leonardo Da Vinci passed his last years in Touraine as the guest of Francis I of France. If that supreme Florentine genius did not literally die in the arms of the French king, as Vasari said, he did so figuratively, for the young monarch, like the French nation, held him in true affection and admiration. But what epitaph is discoverable in the lovely little Gothic Chapel of St. Hubert at the Chateau of Amboise? In 1874 a stone was placed in the floor of the left transept with only this inscription in French:

> Under this stone rest bones collected in the excavations of the old royal chapel of Amboise, among which, it is supposed, are found the mortal remains of Leonardo Da Vinci, born 1452, died 1519.

Truthful, economical, and fond of prose are the French. When they feel moved to poetic expression, they are more likely to create sculpture, or architecture, or paintings. Their sermons on immortality and character may be in stone like Chartres Cathedral, or in words like those of Bossuet and Fenelon; but seldom *on* stone. Their cemeteries are galleries of sculpture or repositories of a few facts concerning the dead. Medallion bas-relief portraits are excellent insurance against oblivion, especially if made by Rodin, like César Franck's in Montparnasse. There Baudelaire's tomb is adorned with what the naive spectators uninitiated to the "Flowers of Evil" take to be a mummy and a bat; Guy de Maupassant exhibits only an open book, in stone, with the dates of his birth and death; but those are the exceptions to the conventional simple tombs. The romantic Alfred de Musset lies under a weeping willow tree, on the main avenue in Père Lachaise cemetery, and his tomb is inscribed with his verses:

> *Mes amis, quand je mourrai*
> *Plantez un saule au cimetière.*
> *J'aime son feuillage éploré,*
> *La paleur m'en est douce et chère,*
> *Et son ombre sera légère*
> *A la terre ou je dormirai.*

(My friends, when I die, plant a willow in the cemetery.
I love its weeping foliage; its paleness is sweet and dear to me;
and its shadow will be light on the earth where I shall sleep.)

The French nation as a whole is classicist in taste and temperament. Their reluctance to express deep emotion except in universal terms and with a calm poise made their epitaph for the Unknown Soldier very brief and simple, yet adequate for each reader to meditate upon and to invest with the deepest significance. Under the Arch of Triumph in Paris by an ever-burning light of remembrance is inscribed: *Ici repose un soldat francais mort pour la patrie 1914-1918.*

Italian epitaphs have been admired and copied for centuries. Byron, classicist as critic while romantic as writer, praised and quoted in a letter to Hoppner June 6, 1819, two epitaphs from the Certosa cemetery at Ferrara:

Martino Luigi implora pace.
Lucrezia Picini implora eterna quiete.

Byron, restless and passionate, was the right person to evaluate justly the meaning of these terse epitaphs: a certain person "prays for peace", and another "implores eternal quiet".

The church of Santa Croce, "Westminster Abbey of Florence", shows many memorials of varying styles. A brief epitaph is that of Machiavelli: *Tanto nomini nullum par elogium.* "To so great a name praise is nothing!" Such a perfect tribute illustrates the Italian grace of expression and sense of fitness, qualities that make their many inscriptions on public or famous places a joy to remember. For example, on the house where Keats died in Rome, the Italian inscription supplements the obligatory information with the words *mente maravigliosa quanto precoce;* but the English, just below the broken lyre on the same tablet, ungraciously translates that "mind marvelous as precocious" with merely the word "young".

In the vestibule of that lovely Renaissance church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, by which Michelangelo gave a new life to part of Diocletian's ruined Baths, two famous epitaphs have conferred distinction, if not immortality, on persons otherwise forgotten. Cardinal Alciati's tomb reads:

Virtute vixit.	(He has lived in virtue.
Memoria vivit.	He lives in memory.
Gloria vivet.	He will live in glory.)

The Cardinal Paolo Parisio's epitaph is:

> *Corpus humo tegitur.*
> *Fama per ora volat.*
> *Spiritus astra tenet.*

Did the Earl of Surrey think of those cameo-like lines when he wrote *On the Death of Sir Thomas Wyatt*?

> But to the heavens that simple soul is fled . . .
> The earth his bones, the heavens possess his ghost.

Did the praiser of Shakespeare at Stratford think of those lines when he wrote *Earth covers him, the nation mourns him, Olympus has him*?

In the unique Roman temple called the Pantheon, the Cardinal Bembo gave Raphael an exquisite epitaph:

> *Ille hic est Raphael, timuit quo sospite vinci*
> *Rerum magna parens, et moriente mori.*

Thomas Hardy translated it into the following couplet:

> Here's one in whom Nature feared—faint at such vying—
> Eclipse while he lived, and decease at his dying.

Alexander Pope admired the Cardinal's lines so much as to use them apparently without acknowledgment in his epitaph on Sir Godfrey Kneller:

> Living, great Nature feared he might outvie
> Her works; and dying, fears herself to die.

As for German epitaphs—what charm or grace of civilization can any intelligent person expect to find on German tombstones? What charm or honor is there in German life—devoted as it is to the worship of a Teutonic monstrosity, a state-Moloch? There is nothing but the melancholy remembrance of a less vicious period, the recognition that in the past the Germans were supposed to hold a decent position in the world. This dismal truth, applied to individual life, is vividly expressed in an epitaph in St. Stephen's Church in Vienna, an outpost no longer against the infidel barbarians as that city was centuries ago. One of the prince-bishops of Vienna, Anton Wolfrath, who died in 1639, bewailed his changed position in this brief epitaph:

> *Fui abbas, episcopus, princeps;*
> *Sum pulvis, umbra, nihil.*

Austria, indeed, was once a powerful leader among nations; now it is "dust, darkness, and nothing." May that epitaph be a symbol! Formerly Germany was powerful; may it become as near nothing as it has made its near and far neighbors on the globe.

One glimpse of pleasing imagery in a German epitaph is in St. John's cemetery in Nuremberg; Longfellow praised it in his poem on that city, and it seems to have an added significance even now. The much-travelled Albrecht Durer is commemorated as follows: "Quicquid Alberti Dureri mortale fuit sub hoc conditur tumulo; emigravit VIII Idus Aprilis 1528." That is to say, the great genius of Germany "emigrated" the sixth of April 1528, to seek a better land presumably. Nowadays emigration from Germany means life, not death, and it is the only way to salvation of either body or soul.

Long have intelligent travellers along life's road looked in vain for one German epitaph. When it is found in all appropriate places, it should read somewhat like this: "Here lie all faithful members of the National Socialist Party of Germany; they have followed their world-infamous leader on his last conquest, and they share with him the post of Satan in the lowest pit of Hell; there through an eternity infinitely prolonged they will receive from the God of Justice their full reward."