

A Review of “The Dead Man” (1919): Roderick Watson Kerr’s Meditations on Death and War

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Abstract

This brief review focuses on “The Dead Man” (1919) by Roderick Watson Kerr and explores how the poem foregrounds a sombre meditation on death, mortality, and the corporeality of the dead through an encounter between the speaker and the decaying body of a deceased man. The poem, written when he was engaged in active military service in the First World War but published a year after the war’s conclusion, neither participates in naïve sentimentality nor in detached adulation for the fallen but offers a nuanced exploration of a range of complex emotions elicited by the encounter. Within this context, the article specifically examines the portrayal of the dead body referred to in the title and how, in the poem, it functions simultaneously as a grotesque object that evokes revulsion as well as the testament to an existence that transcends mortality. This review article was developed as part of an informal paper writing workshop for the MA students in the Department of English, Swami Vivekananda University.

Keywords: *Death, Body, Grotesque, Horror, Mortality*

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Roderick Watson Kerr (1895-1960), a Scottish journalist and poet perhaps best remembered today as the founder of the Porpoise Press, wrote several poems that dealt directly with

the subject of war. Kerr experienced the horror of the war firsthand when he joined active military service, first for the Machine Gun Corps and then for the Royal Tank Corps in the First World War and received the prestigious “Military Cross” for his contribution. During this period, Kerr recorded his experiences in his notebook and scribbled down poems that emerged from these experiences.¹ The poems were later compiled in the collection titled *War Daubs: Poems* and published a year after the end of the war, i.e., 1919, by the London-based publisher John Lane. “The Dead Man” (1919), a poem written during Kerr’s active participation in the military campaign, portrays the visceral horror emanating from the speaker’s encounter with the body of a deceased man who has been shot repeatedly. Through this encounter, the poet not only foregrounds the violence and trauma inflicted on human beings by armed conflicts but also problematizes notions of heroism and valour that are often attributed to death and martyrdom in wars. This article offers a concise analytical review of the poem’s treatment of death in the poem and how the corpse functions simultaneously as a grotesque object that evokes revulsion as well as a testament to an existence that transcends mortality.²

The speaker in the poem experiences a range of emotions upon his encounter with the body of the dead man full of gaping holes, presumably left by bullet injuries, indicating that he has been a casualty of the war. The opening of the poem palpably evokes feelings of visceral horror and revulsion through the decomposing body, which nudges the speaker to a somber and petrified meditation on his own mortality. The human body in the poem, in its lifeless form and a “sodden” state, functions as an uncanny phobic essence — a source of fear and anxiety in those who encounter it. Therefore, one witnesses a coming together of the corporeal with the psychological, the mundane and the metaphysical, in the poem’s depiction of death and the transformative power of the dead upon the living. The encounter with the dead thus embodies a

1 The biographical information about Roderick Watson Kerr is borrowed from the *Scottish Poetry Library*. See “Works Cited” for more information about the source.

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violent rupture between the un-lived life full of possibilities and the grotesqueness of his lifeless existence marked by the decomposition of flesh and bones: "Perhaps those blackened bones/Were subtly fashioned hand and wrist/That made sweet violin tones,/Or held a face till lips had kissed!" (Kerr). His body, once an embodiment of youth, beauty, mirth, and love, has been reduced to a "heap of slime." The disjunction between the un-lived life and the reality of death in the poem is stark and distressing—delineated with a jarring directness reminiscent of fellow Scottish Wat poet Charles Hamilton Sorley's invocation of the "mouthless dead" and how young soldiers await the same horrifying fate in "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead" (1916).

However, the "hideous mockery" of life inscribed in the grotesqueness of the corpse and the deeply unsettling uncanniness it evokes in the poem is accompanied by a desperate appeal by the speaker—to move beyond the corporeality and the transience of the corpse and embrace the transcendence that human life can achieve. The speaker's argument is simple: while the human body decays after death and death marks the finality of man's corporeal existence, he may live on in the memory of his loved ones, untouched by time, death, or decay. The irony lies in the simultaneous affirmation of the finiteness of human life that death embodies as well as the infiniteness of immortality in the memory of those who love him. Therefore, the corpse, despite its horrifying material presence and its capacity to produce overwhelming abjection, marks a crucial site of transition. Nonetheless, the possibility of an existence that outlives the material body speculated in the poem is hardly an optimistic affirmation. Rather, it betrays a desperate effort to escape the traumatic encounter: "Then come! let's kill the memory of this place -/O friends! it had a hideous, ebony face!" (Kerr). Similarly, even though the dead man may live in his lover's heart "embalmed" and "unchanging," resisting the unstoppable march of time, the two must live forever apart since that love can only be cherished in fond remembrance but can never be consummated.

It might be argued that Kerr's treatment of death in the poem is marked by themes that are frequently recurring in the works of British poets of the First World War. "The Dead Man" resonates with the corporeal and psychological violence inflicted by wars, the futility of both life and death, and the desperate longing for an existence that transcends mortality as explored by, albeit in varying degrees, styles, and with different points of emphases, the likes of Ewart Alan Mackintosh, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Wilfred Owen, and Siegfried Sassoon, among others. Kerr's poem refuses to participate in any tacit acceptance of war as a necessary evil; unlike Sassoon's "Absolution" (1917), the war, despite being also described as a "scourge," is neither waged for freedom nor to gain wisdom. Similarly, the poem is not a lament in the manner of Wilfred Owen's "Futility" even though it echoes the sentiment foregrounded in it, for the "The Dead Man" reflects in equal measures not only the one who has been killed but the ones who have survived and the poem, as the final stanza indicates, is as much about the need for preserving sanity and humanity in the face of the traumatic encounter with the corpse as it is about the abjection evoked by the corpse itself.

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