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Closed Tombs, Open Books: The *Decameron*'s Tombs as Signs of Death and Resurrection*

…for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death.

Keats

In the *Decameron*'s Introduction, the narrator Boccaccio recounts the violation of social, ethical, and religious norms, not least with regard to the burial of the dead:

> Alla gran moltitudine de' corpi mostrata, che a ogni chiesa ogni dí e quasi ogn'ora concorreva portata, non bastando la terra sacra alle sepolture, e massimamente volendo dare a ciascun luogo proprio secondo l'antico costume, si facevano per gli cimiterii delle chiese, poi che ogni parte era piena, fosse grandissime nelle quali a centinaia si mettevono i sopravegnenti: e in quelle stivati, come si mettono le mercantantie nelle navi a suolo a suolo, con poca terra si ricoprendo infino a tanto che della fossa al sommo si pervenia. (1.Intro. 42)[1].

> Such was the multitude of corpses (of which further consignments were arriving every day and almost by the hour at each of the churches), that there was not sufficient ground for each of them to be buried in, especially if each was to have its own plot in accordance with long-established custom. So when all the graves were full, huge trenches were excavated in the churchyards, into which new arrivals were placed in their hundreds, stowed tier upon tier like ships' cargo, each layer of corpses being covered over with a thin layer of soil till the trench was full.

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[1] All citations of the Italian text are from G. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. V. Branca, Einaudi, Torino 1992 and follow Branca's line numeration. The English translation of reference is G. Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G.H. McWilliam, 2nd ed., Penguin, New York 1995, pp. 11-12, slightly modified. Hereafter cited as McWilliam.

The dead are layered "like lasagna", to use the words of a later chronicler[2]. They rest in open or half-closed graves, greeting newcomers by the day or hour, "till the trench was full".

I would like to consider the resonance of this opening image in the course of the *Decameron* by tracing how various storytellers respond to the sudden mortality of their fellow citizens through their account of tombs for the dead. Tombs play a key role in a number of tales: Fiammetta's account of Andreuccio da Perugia (2.5); Lauretta's story of Ferondo (3.8); Elissa's tale of Guido Cavalcanti (6.9); and Lauretta's story, on the final day, of Gentile de' Carisendi (10.4)[3]. Each of these tales has deserved its own, extended treatment. My point is to observe and analyze the place of tombs in sequence, in order to discern a meaning not only about life and death, but also our engagement with both. We will discover as well the author's meditation on speech and silence, for if speech, as Dante noted, is a sign of human life (as *animal loquens*), silence can be considered the reserve of the dead[4].

This commentary draws inspiration from Freud's essay *The Theme of the Three Caskets*. Freud examines Portia's challenge to her suitors in *The Merchant of Venice* asking each of them to choose among caskets of gold, silver, and lead, lead, the last, being the one containing her portrait[5]. Freud considers the casket as a feminine symbol, relating it also to the three mythological Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos, with the last – "the inexorable" – most directly alluding to the necessity of death[6]. The casket theme therefore conveys the play between love and death, choice

[2] Marchionne di Coppo di S. Buonaiuti, *Cronaca fiorentina*, ed. N. Rodolico, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 30.1, S. Lapi, Città di Castello 1903-1955, p. 231, lines 16-19: "La mattina se ne trovavano assai nella fossa, toglievasi della terra, e gittavassi laggiuso loro addosso; e poi veniano gli altri sopr'essi, e poi la terra adosso a suolo, con poco terra, come si minestrasse lasagne a fornire di formaggio."

[3] These stories are not an inclusive list of tomb-narratives – 9.1 is yet another example – but they provide rich material for reflection on this theme.

[4] Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* I.2.1-2: Hec est nostra vera prima locutio. Non dico autem "nostra" ut et aliam sit esse locutionem quam hominis: nam corum que sunt omnium solie homini datum est loqui, cum solum sibi necessarium fuerit. Non angelis, non inferioribus animalibus necessarium fuit loqui, sed nequicquam datum fuisset eis: quod nempe facere natura aborret; cf. I.4: Soli homini datum fuit ut loqueretur, ut ex premissis manifestum est. Also *Par*. 26.130-132.

[5] This story, Freud notes, has a medieval antecedent in the *Gesta Romanorum*. S. Freud, *The Theme of the Three Caskets*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. J. Strachey, Hogarth Press, London 1958, volume 12, pp. 289-302; p. 291. See Freud's remarks on silence as a sign of death (p. 294).

[6] Boccaccio discusses the Three Fates in *GDG* 1.5, citing Seneca on their force: "Sed etiam trahere non aliter quam si de necessitate contingetur omnia [they compel, as if they touch everything out of necessity]." *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. J. Solomon, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2011, pp. 66-67.

and necessity, in which choice represents "a wishful reversal": "Choice stands in the place of necessity, of destiny"; the woman is no longer conceived as the Goddess of Death, but the Goddess of Love (299). To cite Freud at greater length:

> The Moerae [Fates] were created as a result of the discovery that warned man that he is part of nature and therefore subject to the immutable law of death. Something in man was bound to struggle against this subjugation, for it is only with extreme unwillingness that he gives up his claim to an exceptional position. Man, as we know, makes use of his imaginative activity in order to satisfy the wishes that reality does not satisfy. So his imagination rebelled against the recognition of the truth embodied in the myth of the Moerae, and constructed instead the myth derived from it, in which the Goddess of Death was replaced by the Goddess of Love (299).

We do not have to accept fully Freud's human-centered, psychoanalytical explanation in order to recognize his comments' philosophical import for the *Decameron*. Nor would Freud, in the realm of symbols and images, want us to stumble over his *casket* essay as a study for *tombs* in the *Decameron*[7]. Both caskets and tombs are feminine symbols for life and death, images of the womb and mortal enclosure. The *Decameron* frame suggests as much. The narrator addresses the needs of women, who, closeted in their rooms as if entombed, find relief in these tales of love. The *brigata*, overwhelmed by the fact of death wrought by the plague, turn to charming, erotic stories as a remedy, an outlet; it chooses love and words in the face of death and silence. At the same time, the group seeks closure: it searches for a way to accept the reality of death.

In thinking on the reality of death, Boccaccio artistically elaborates a key dictum from Cicero's *Tusculans*, itself a translation of Plato's *Phaedo*:

> Tota enim philosophorum vita, ut ait idem, commentatio mortis est.
>
> For the whole life of the philosopher, as the same wise man [Socrates] says, is a thoughtful meditation [μελέτημα] on death[8].

[7] For a discussion of the casket theme elsewhere in the *Decameron*, see O. Holmes, *Boccaccio and Exemplary Literature: Ethics and Mischief in the* Decameron, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023, pp. 122-124.

[8] Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, ed. and trans. J.E. King, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1945, 1.30.74, translation modified. Cicero is rendering *Phaedo* 67d: καὶ τὸ μελέτημα αὐτὸ τοῦτό ἐστιν τῶν φιλοσόφων, λύσις καὶ χωρισμὸς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ σώματος. This dictum received repeated affirmation among Renaissance humanists, ultimately in Montaigne's essay, "Que philosopher, c'est apprender à mourir."

Tombs, in the Christian religion, are the locus of death and resurrection, finitude and eternity, decay and renewal. This setting requires coming to terms, philosophically, with the fact of death, and it is the *brigata*'s play with words, over the days of storytelling, that bring this fact into sharper relief, and confront the *brigata* and their readers with their reluctance and courage to appropriate, existentially and psychologically, death's meaning.

Let us see how the tombs in Boccaccio's narrative build out this idea. To this end, Freud's ideas offer us insight, especially when appreciated in consort with phenomenology. Phenomenology is the philosophical study of temporality and human finitude, and like Freud's analyses gathered strength in the aftermath of the First World War, with casualties in Europe unseen since the time of the Second Pandemic. For good reason thinkers have recognized the philosophical gravity of Freud's writings, especially around the theme of death[9].

The graves in Florence are hardly tombs – that is, closed spaces. Being provisional and irresolute, they may be seen to prompt the *brigata* to leave the plague-struck city and find closure to this tragedy through their storytelling. The storytellers' use of tombs in these four tales wrestle with the necessity of death, including its pull on humanity against, and alongside, the pull of eros. The stories suggest dreamscapes in their allusive symbology, tracing the vein of life together with the vein of death.

We begin with the story of Andreuccio, narrated by Fiammetta. Andreuccio goes to Naples and naively falls prey to the machinations of a prostitute who pretends to be his sister and steals his money[10]. Andreuccio suffers a series of misadventures: he falls into a sewer, then falls in with thieves who leave him down a well before taking him to the tomb of an Archbishop, where they intend to despoil the corpse. Having been forced into the tomb, Andreuccio fears that the thieves will flee with

[9] Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*: *An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. D. Savage, Yale University Press, New Haven 1970, especially pp. 375-396; and H. Carel, *Life and Death in Freud and Heidegger*, Radopi, New York 2006. I have examined phenomenology's relevance to the *Decameron* in *Eros and Evanescence in the Decameron: The Weave of Love, Time, and Memory*, in *Categories of the 'Decameron',* ed. K. Brown, "Quaderni d'Italianistica" Vol. 38.2, 2017, pp. 113-137.

[10] Among the commentaries on this story, see F. Ceretta, *La Novella di Andreuccio: Problemi di Unità e d'Interpretazione,* in "Italica", Vol. 47.3, 1970, pp. 255-64; L. Rossi, *I tre 'gravi accidenti' della 'novella' di Andreuccio da Perugia (*Decameron, II, v*)*, in "*Strumenti critici*", Vol. 11.3, 1996, pp. 385-400; C. Kleinhenz, *Andreuccio da Perugio (Decameron 2.5): Scatological Humor, the Odor of Sanctity, and Eschatology* in *Medusa's Gaze*: *Essays on Gender, Literature, and Aesthetics in the Italian Renaissance, in honor of Robert J. Rodini*, ed. P.A. Ferrara, E. Giusti, and J. Tylus, "Italiana" XI, 2004, pp. 233-251; and M. Fritz-Morkin, *Andreuccio at the Well: Sanitation Infrastructure and Civic Values in* Decameron *II.5*, in "Heliotropia", Vol. 8-9, 2011-12, pp. 35-49.

goods and so he pretends not to find the most valuable possession, the archbishop's ring. The thieves in fact trap him inside the tomb, but other graverobbers, including a priest, open it again. Andreuccio scares them off and makes good his escape with the ring.

Fiammetta's story occurs in the thematic of Day Two: "chi, da diverse cose infestato, sia oltre alla speranza riuscito a lieto fine [those who after suffering a series of misfortunes are brought to a state of unexpected happiness]"[11]. And, as in a fable, Andreuccio suffers three near-death calamities, all involving entrapment: by the Sicilian prostitute; in the well; and finally in the tomb. At the outset he is seduced by the charming young woman. She may pretend to be his sister, but Fiammetta describes her ways and her place in terms of erotic desire:

> Ella era ancora assai giovane, di persona grande e con bellissimo viso, vestita e ornata assai orrevolemente… Ella appresso, per la man presolo, suso nella sua sala il menò e di quella, senza alcuna cosa parlare, con lui nella sua camera se n'entrò, la quale di rose, di fiori d'aranci e d'altri odori tutto oliva, là dove egli un bellissimo letto incortinato e molte robe su per le stanghe vide… E postisi a sedere insieme sopra una cassa che appiè del suo letto era, così gli cominciò a parlare…
>
> She was still very young, tall in stature, with a very beautiful face, and her clothes and jewelry were a model of good taste… Then she took him by the hand, and led him up to the main room of her house, from whence, without saying anything, she passed with him into her bedroom, which was all fragrant with roses, orange-blossom and other pleasant odours. Then he saw an exquisite curtained bed, a large number of dresses hanging from pegs… Having made him sit by her side on a chest at the foot of the bed, she began to speak to him in this way…[12]

The dreamlike scene that Fiammetta details suggests the woman's power of seduction, a seduction involving not only eros but also danger and death, of which Andreuccio is unconscious. Listeners are aware of this threat of death, and Fiammetta indicates it first through the silence of the scene – "without saying anything" – and the chest, which underscores the concealment of her present intentions and Andreuccio's future fate, as he soon falls into the narrow alley of the sewer.

Andreuccio's subsequent interlude in the well provides a moment of comic relief. Taken by the two thieves to wash there, they abandon him at the bottom, having fled on the arrival of the property owners. These hoist him up, imagining the bucket is full, but then take fright at his ap-

[11] McWilliam, *op. cit.*, p. 68; 1.Concl.11.
[12] Ivi, pp. 99-100 (translation modified); 2.5.15-18, my emphases.

pearance and run away. Fiammetta underscores, with a comic touch, the mortal danger he overcomes: "e se egli non si fosse bene attenuto, egli sarebbe infin nel fondo caduto forse non senza suo gran danno o morte [and if he hadn't held on tightly, he would have fallen to the bottom, perhaps being killed or doing himself serious injury]"[13].

The thieves return and, arriving with him at the Archbishop's tomb, suggest that Andreuccio enter it and seize the possessions. But now Andreuccio has become wary – "costoro mi ci fanno entrare per ingannarmi [these two are making me go inside so as to leave me in the lurch]", he says to himself – and he enters into the tomb only after they threaten him. He hides the ring from the thieves and they shut the lid on the tomb, trapping him inside. Fiammetta says, "La qual cosa sentendo Andreuccio, qual egli allor divenesse ciascun sel può pensare [Having experienced this, you can imagine the effect it had on him]." For this is the third, and most grievous entrapment. The first two instances, in the sewer and well, prefigure this one, and Andreuccio confronts his fate in a state of exhaustion: "per che da grave dolor vinto, venendo meno cadde sopra il morto corpo dell'arcivescovo; e chi allora veduti gli avesse malagevolemente avrebbe conosciuto chi più fosse morto, o l'arcivescovo o egli [in the depths of despair, he fainted and collapsed on the archbishop's corpse. And if anyone could have seen them at this moment, he would have had a job to tell which of the two were dead, the Archbishop or Andreuccio]." He is like a dead man, silenced in the tomb[14].

There is relief and revival, a pattern foreshadowed by the episode at the well. The next set of graverobbers arrives, led by a priest. They, Fiammetta says, are already possessed by a fear of the dead. The priest makes a brave show of it, but on entering the tomb, he feels Andreuccio pull his leg, and the entire cohort takes flight.

What is the meaning of this tale, as it relates to the presence of the tomb? Symbolically, there is death and resurrection: Andreuccio 'dies' three times, the last most immediately and vividly. In this way, the literal entombment clarifies and accentuates the entrapment in the sewer and in the well. As the transitional episode, the well features not only enclosure but rejuvenation, for here Andreuccio both suffers a near fatal burial in the earth, as well as a cleansing. It prepares him for the adventure in the tomb, also by teaching him the perfidy of the two thieves.

For Fiammetta's listeners, who have experienced the reversals of fortune, the broken rituals and hasty burials of Florence, her story has an arc of return and release, closure and openness, as Andreuccio is seduced, trapped, and freed. He is naively enchanted and drawn to danger. He

[13] Ivi, p. 108; 2.5.69.
[14] Ivi, pp. 109-110 (modified); 2.5.77-79.

flirts with disaster, but fate is kind in the end. He lives to tell the tale to his companions and the innkeeper, who advises him to leave the dark place of Naples and return to Perugia.

Lauretta's tale the next day about Ferondo, his wife, and the abbot develops the tomb-imagery more intensely[15]. There are two tombs (*un avello* and *una tomba*) in the story, in fact, and the plot concerns Ferondo's apparent demise and return to the land of the living.

To summarize the plot: an abbot, reputed for his saintliness, desires to sleep with Ferondo's wife, who is tormented by her husband's jealousy. The abbot arranges for Ferondo to be drugged. Considered to be dead, he is transported to a tomb, where he is told that he is in purgatory and scourged for his sin. The abbot conducts his affair with the wife and when she becomes pregnant, he releases Ferondo in a scene of resurrection.

The tomb serves as a place of imprisonment and release, death and a return to life, as it did for Andreuccio. In Lauretta's story, moreover, the credulous Ferondo *believes* he is dead and suffering for the sin of jealousy: "disse Ferondo, 'Dunque sono io morto?' Disse il monaco, 'Mai sí [Ferondo said, 'Do you mean to say I am dead, then?' 'You certainly are', said the monk]"[16]. Ferondo therefore, in his mind, experiences the afterlife. Lauretta moves the entire tale fully into the realm of both interiority – Ferondo's heart, mind, and experience – and seeming. If Andreuccio gradually awakens to his naivete and the deceptions of others, Ferondo and his fellow citizens remain captive to credulity, and his moment of resurrection leads, Cepparello-like, to a reputation of heightened saintliness not only for himself but for the abbot: "La tornata di Ferondo e le sue parole, credendo quasi ogn'uom che risuscitato fosse, acrebbero senza fine la fama della santità dell' abate [Since nearly everyone was convinced that he really had been brought back from the dead, Ferondo's return and his tall stories immeasurably enhanced the Abbot's reputation for saintliness]"[17].

The exposure of this deception occurs among the *brigata*, not within the narrative. Lauretta begins:

> Dirò adunque come un vivo per morto sepellito fosse, e come poi per risuscitato, e non per vivo, egli stesso e molti altri lui credessero essere della sepoltura uscito, colui di ciò essendo per santo adorato che come colpevole ne dovea piú tosto essere condannato.

[15] Among the commentaries, see M. Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the "Decameron",* Toronto University Press, Toronto 2003, pp. 54-71; and M. Eisner, *The Tale of Ferondo's Purgatory (III.8)*, in *The* Decameron *Third Day in Perspective*: *Volume Three of the* Lectura Boccaccii, ed. F. Ciabattoni and P.M. Forni, Toronto University Press, Toronto 2014, pp. 150-169.

[16] McWilliam, *op. cit.*, p. 260; 3.8.41-42.

[17] Ivi, p. 264; 3.8.76.

> My story, then, is about a living man who was buried for dead, and who later, on emerging from his tomb, was convinced that he had truly died and been resurrected – a belief that was shared by many other people, who consequently venerated him as a Saint when they should have been condemning him as a fool.[18]

What are Lauretta's listeners and readers to make of this irony? Ferondo's scourging in the closed space of the tomb is comic, as the jealous fool is punished. Nonetheless there is something grand and moving in his discovery of being alive:

> La mattina in sul far del giorno Ferondo si risentí e vide per alcuno pertugio dell'avello lume, il quale egli veduto non avea ben diece mesi: per che, parendogli esser vivo, cominciò a gridare – Apritemi, apritemi! – e egli stesso a pontar col capo nel coperchio dello avello sí forte, che ismossolo…

> A little after dawn next morning, Ferondo came to his senses and saw light through a crack in the tomb, which he had not seen for ten full months. Sensing he was alive, he began to shout, "Open up! Open up!" and at the same time began to press his head against the lid of the tomb so strongly that he moved it.[19]

If Andreuccio thought himself dead in the tomb, Ferondo sees the light in the darkness and recognizes he is now living. His immediate reaction is to cry out, as he struggles to return to life: he will no longer be closed up in silence, and like a chick within an egg, strives to escape the tomb.

And a both immediate and deeper meaning of this resurrection is contained in the cause of his relief: his wife's pregnancy. Lauretta remarks almost casually:

> Ma, come avvengono le sventure, la donna ingravidò, e prestamente accortasene, il disse all'abate: per che ad ammenduni parve che senza alcuno indugio Ferondo fosse da dovere essere di Purgatorio rivocato a vita e che a lei si tornasse, e ella di lui dicesse che gravida fosse.

> But accidents will happen, and the lady became pregnant, and as soon as she found out told the abbot, and it seemed to both of them that Ferondo must be summoned back to life from Purgatory at once and reunited with his wife, and that she tell him that she was pregnant with his child.[20]

[18] Ivi, p. 254; 3.8.3.
[19] Ivi, p. 263 (revised); 3.8.68.
[20] Ivi, p. 262 (revised); 3.8.64.

With one imminent birth, there must be another. Before the child comes into this world, Ferondo must be recalled to it.

While the abbot literally designs Ferondo's rebirth as another deception, as a cover for his affair, readers cannot overlook the symbolic resonance of the two events: birth and resurrection, in which the tomb displays, as Freud noted, its feminine imagery as a womb. Lauretta's tale therefore subtly conveys the forward, erotic progress of life in the face of death. Death is not defeated here on earth; if anything, its facticity is confirmed. But out of the plague, the story suggests, new life emerges.

Lauretta's readers can therefore understand the story on a mythical level, as life struggles against death, and as humanity struggles to comprehend, existentially, the fact of death as life's final possibility on earth[21]. This reading finds confirmation in the initial conversation between the abbot and Ferondo's wife. Neither receives a proper name, underscoring their role as more universalized figures in the drama. His wife is not only an agent of life, capable of carrying a child, but also an agent of death. Lauretta's audience hears the wife's first words to the abbot:

> Messere, se Idio m'avesse dato marito o non me l'avesse dato, forse mi sarebbe agevole co' vostri ammaestramenti d'entrare nel camino che ragionato n'avete che mena altrui a vita eterna; ma io, considerato chi è Ferondo e la sua stoltizia, mi posso dir vedova, e pur maritata sono, in quanto, vivendo esso, altro marito aver non posso…
>
> Sir, if God had given me a real husband, or no husband at all, perhaps it would be easy for me to set out under your guidance along the path you were telling us about, which leads to eternal life. Yet when considering the sort of man Ferondo is, and the foolish way he behaves, I can call myself a widow, even though I am married in so far as, as long as he is living, I can have no other husband…[22]

These are the first spoken words in the story, and set in motion the plan for Ferondo's entombment and death-experience. The abbot says, "Egli convien ch'e' muoia, e così v'andra [He will have to die, and so will go there]"; after Ferondo suffers his punishment, "noi con certe orazioni pregheremo Idio che in questa vita il ritorni, e Egli il farà [we shall recite certain prayers asking God to bring him back to this life on earth, and

[21] Since death is the ultimate "not yet". Cf. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 19th ed., Max Niemeyer, Tübingen, §§45-68, pp. 231-246, who cites in this regard the medieval *The Ploughman from Bohemia* by Johannes von Tepl (p. 245). This is understood, as noted, existentially, and therefore in the temporal realm; for Christians, life remains under the pressure of the eternal (which includes, religiously, the possibilities of salvation and damnation).
[22] McWilliam, *op. cit.*, p. 255 (revised); 3.8.8.

God will do it].” At the close of the conversation, she tells the abbot she herself feels trapped, and she confirms the plan: “Pur che egli di questa mala ventura guerisca, ché egli non mi convenea a sempre stare in prigione, io son contenta [It sounds all right to me, provided it cures this malady of his, so that I will no longer remain in prison my whole life]”[23].

Ferondo’s wife feels in prison, like a widow who can’t move forward, and she presents the abbot with the occasion, and opportunity, to remove Ferondo from among the living and trap him in the confinement he has long imposed on her.

The mythical dream-symbolism of Lauretta’s tale addresses, even in its reversals and contradictions, the life-situation of the *brigata* and Boccaccio’s readers. There is a clear parallel between the “vaghe donne… nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere racchiuse [charming ladies… cooped up with the narrow confines of their rooms]” (Pr. 9-10) and the *brigata* trapped in the plague-ridden city, surrounded by death[24]. Now Ferondo’s wife, having experienced this stifling, life-thieving confinement, seeks relief through the death of her husband by concealing him in the tomb.

Lauretta modifies the violence done to Ferondo – it would have been simple to have drugged him with an overdose, or left him to die in the tomb – in order to provide a comic resolution. This resolution celebrates life, not only Ferondo’s return to the living, but also the birth of the child and, not least, his wife’s ongoing sexual freedom. In this tale, eros trumps death. But it also makes use of death to achieve its ends. If Lauretta provides a chink of light to the *brigata*’s experience of the plague, her listeners are reminded of this experience.

The tombs in Elissa’s tale of Guido Cavalcanti (6.9) present a variation on this theme. Unlike the tombs in the other stories we examine, the tombs outside the Baptistery remain closed. So at first glance the story may seem out of place. Yet these tombs, on further reflection, still reside in the polysemous, liminal zone between death and life; they show the pull of both forces, in their complementary tension. They paradoxically offer, in their closure, a symbolic opening and escape to new possibilities.

This famous story recounts how Betto Brunelleschi and his *brigata*, an entourage of boon companions, confront Guido and mock him for his supposed Epicureanism[25]. Guido responds, “Signori, voi mi potete dire

[23] Ivi, p. 256 (revised); 3.8.15, 3.8.18.
[24] Ivi, p. 2; Pr. 9-10.
[25] Commentaries on this novella include P. F. Watson, *On Seeing Guido Cavalcanti and the Houses of the Dead*, in “Studi sul Boccaccio”, Vol. 18, 1989, pp. 301-318; G. Gorni, *Guido Calvacanti nella novella del Boccaccio (*Decameron *VI, 9) e in un sonetto di Dino Compagni*, in “Cuadernos de filología italiana”, 8 Supp. Issue, 2001, pp. 39-45; M. Sherberg, *The Governance of Friendship: Law and Gender in the* Decameron, The Ohio State University Press, Columbus 2011, pp. 79-83; L. Shepard, *Guido Cavalcanti Among the*

a casa vostra ciò che vi piace [Gentlemen, in your house you may say whatever you like to me]", and leaps over the tombs, leaving Betto and his group to decipher the meaning of his remarks. Betto offers his reading: that they belong to the house of the dead on account of being "idioti e non litterati [uncouth and unlettered]"[26].

In Elissa's narrative, the tombs are the foundation and fulcrum of the plot. She indicates that Guido liked to walk through the tombs around the Baptistery on his way from Or San Michele, and she describes him as a master logician and natural philosopher (6.9.7). His detached manner led others to think him an Epicurean, in the common understanding of a speculative atheist or agnostic. He delighted to think among the dead, in other words, and separate himself from the worldly practices of Betto and his mates. That is at the heart of their mockery: "Guido tu rifiuti d'esser di nostra brigata; ma ecco, quando tu arai trovato che Idio non sia, che avrai fatto? [Guido, you spurn our company; but supposing you find God doesn't exist, what good will it do you?]"[27].

Implicit in this question is that Guido's separation from them is a separation from civic custom that includes conventional religious pieties. Guido's response turns this association between social convention and piety on its head: it is Betto's gang that are in the dead-house, and the response naturally stuns and confuses them. Betto reads the response as Guido's indictment of their lack of education, and the group henceforth considers Betto a "sottile e intendente cavaliere [shrewd and intelligent knight], in Elissa's closing words[28].

But symbols, especially those of a poet-philosopher, do not limit themselves to a univocal reading. The story attends to tombs, those "arche grandi di marmo, che oggi sono in Santa Reparata [great marble tombs, now to be found in Santa Reparata]" (6.9.10). These tombs are large, heavy, and monumental. They structure, literally and figuratively, the plot. Seeming at first to confine Cavalcanti within their ambit, nonetheless he "sì come colui che leggerissimo era, prese un salto e fussi gittato dall'altra parte, e sviluppastasi de loro se s'andò [vaulted over the top of it [a tombstone], being very light and nimble, and landed on the

Tombstones in *Boccaccio in America: 2010 International Boccaccio Conference, American Boccaccio Association, UMass Amherst, April 30-May 1*, ed. E. Filosa and M. Papio, Longo, Ravenna 2012, pp. 209-218; K. M. Olson, *Courtesy Lost*: *Dante, Boccaccio, and the Literature of History*, Toronto University Press, Toronto 2014, pp. 34-40; and S. Barsella, *Natural Asymmetries: Medicine and Poetry in* Decameron *VI.9 and* Decameron *VIII.9*, *MLN*, Volume 134 Supplement, 2019, pp. S56-S77. As often noted, the entire story works in the ambit of *Inf.* 10, which describes the tombs of Epicureans.

[26] McWilliam, *op. cit.*, pp. 467-468; 6.9.12 and 6.9.14.

[27] Ivi, p.468; 6.9.11.

[28] Ivi, p.468 (slightly revised); 6.9.15.

other side, whence, having escaped from their clutches, he proceeded on his way]"[29].

Cavalcanti's leap also has figurative meaning[30]. He transcends – easily – the earth-bound, closed understanding of the group. His own way of thinking escapes their grasp. At the same time the leap bases itself on the tombs: "posta la mano sopra una di quelle arche, che grandi erano [he placed a hand on one of the tombstones, which were very large]"[31]. The tombs, his thoughts on death, enable the jump beyond them.

This interdependency between death and life, elegy and lyric, finds confirmation in the word Betto's *brigata* uses first to describe Cavalcanti: "cominciarono a dire che egli era un smemorato e che quello che egli aveva risposto non veniva a dir nulla [they began to declare that he had lost the plot, and that this remark was meaningless]." He is *smemorato*, "one who has lost one's memory", and by extension is demented, a fool. Betto in turn rebukes his companions, "Gli smemorati siete voi, se voi non l'avete inteso [You're the ones who have lost the plot, if you can't understand what he meant]"[32]. It is they who have lost sense of full reality and are trapped in illusion by their conventional way of thinking.

What has Guido in fact remembered that the worldly courtiers have overlooked, and hidden from themselves? One answer: the dead, in their final resting places, the grand marble tombs that face the Baptistery. For Boccaccio and his readers, the Baptistery is the gateway to new life. Elissa shrewdly notes that the door to the Baptistery of San Giovanni was locked (6.9.10): it is closed, or not yet open. It remains for Guido, Elissa, and her listeners to commemorate the dead in ways that the courtiers, and plague-ridden Florence, and mortal humanity, have forgotten. By recounting the words and deeds of the dead, the living can find possibilities and potentialities that, with one poetic leap, the future holds. To recall Freud's essay more explicitly, death resides side-by-side with life, and to mistake the force of one is to mistake the power of the other.

Boccaccio will ask: how many of his readers are Cavalcanti, and not rather Betto or indeed his *brigata*? Who will think upon the fact of the dead; who will recount his or her experience with death and not cast that experience, like a disturbing dream, into forgetfulness, veiling it

[29] Ivi, p. 467-468; 6.9.10-6.9.12.
[30] Here Italo Calvino's thoughts on Cavalcanti's *leggerezza* are relevant, when he speaks of "l'agile salto improvviso del poeta-filosofo che si solleva sulla pesantezza del mondo, dimonstrando che la sua gravità contiene il segreto della leggerezza…." *Lezioni americane: Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, Mondadori, Milano 1993, pp. 15-16.
[31] McWilliam, *op. cit.*, p. 468; 6.9.12.
[32] Ivi, p. 468 (revised); 6.9.13-6.9.14.

(to use Freud's term) with the silence of death? Who among any *brigata* can explore, like a poet-philosopher, the dark recesses of one's inner life and its desires, its fears and its longings, and uprightly voice this exploration? Lauretta's tomb-tale of the final day (10.4) addresses these questions.

Her tomb-story of Messer Gentile and Madonna Catalina is arguably the strangest and most complex, as it weaves together the strands of the earlier tales[33]. Briefly said, Gentile loves Catalina, who is married to another man, Niccoluccio. Catalina, in the early stages of pregnancy, falls into a swoon and is declared dead. Gentile secretly comes to visit her body in the tomb and, touching her breast, feels a heartbeat. He takes her to his house and restores her to her senses, while keeping her presence secret. He then arranges a large banquet, where he returns her with her child to Niccoluccio, having first questioned the guests about the meaning of compassion.

If we recall the events of Elissa's story of Ferondo, we see again the link between pregnancy and entombment. Ferondo's stay in purgatory permits his wife to conceive a child with the abbot, and his return to the world coincides with this conception. Here there are darker, potentially tragic forces at work: Catalina suffers "un fiero accidente [a violent unexpected illness]" while pregnant, "il quale fu tale e di tanta forza, che in lei spense ogni segno di vita, e per ciò eziandio da alcun medico morta giudicata fu… [whose effects were so powerful and serious that all sign of life in her was extinguished, and consequently she was adjudged, even by her physicians, to be dead]."[34] It is a series of accidents and errors, ultimately one mistaking her for dead, that lead to her burial. She is buried, entombed, with the child.

Gentile, under the cover of darkness, goes to the tomb. Here Lauretta challenges her listeners to contend with the twin powers of love and death, *eros* and *thanatos*, to the point of necrophilia. Gentile soliloquizes:

> Ecco, madonna Catalina, tu se' morta: io, mentre che vivesti, mai un solo sguardo da te aver non potei: per che, ora che difender non ti potrai, convien per certo che, così morta come tu se', io alcun bascio ti tolga…
>
> So, Madonna Catalina, you are dead! You never accorded me so much as a single glance when you were alive; but now that you are dead, and cannot ward off my advances, I am determined to steal some kisses from you.[35]

[33] For commentary, see G. Cavallini, *La decima giornata del* Decameron, Bulzoni, Roma 1980, pp. 64-76; Migiel, *A Rhetoric*, pp. 121-17 and 131-135; and Sherberg, *Governance*, pp. 202-206.
[34] McWilliam, *op. cit.*, p. 719 (slightly revised); 10.4.6.
[35] Ivi, p. 720 (revised); 10.4.8.

His lady love has become the lady of death: "now that you are dead, I am determined to steal a kiss or two from you." Within the tomb, his erotic feelings over her apparent corpse spur him not only to kiss, but also to fondle her. "Deh! perché non le tocco io, poi che io son qui, un poco il petto? Io non la debbo mai più toccare, né mai più la toccai [Ah! why should I not place my hand gently on her breast, now that I am here? I have never touched her before, and I shall never have another opportunity]"[36].

Lauretta's narrative conveys his rapture: it is a morbid rapture, an amorous longing for the dead. Her listeners and readers might recall *Eliduc*, the lay of Marie de France, in which the title character betrays his wife by falling in love with another woman, the princess Guilliadun. When Guilliadun discovers Eliduc's marriage, she falls, like Catalina, into a deathlike swoon. Eliduc at an earlier moment had been able to wake her from a previous faint, declaring, "sweet love … you are my life and my death."[37] In a mythical sense, Guilliadun is his woman of choice, and also of fateful necessity. When she faints a second time and will not wake, he buries her in a hermit's chapel and visits her every day, pledging to take holy orders and separate himself from the world.

Lauretta recounts her episode of the tomb without, we might say, benefit of clergy. And while Guilliadun is roused from her sleep almost miraculously by an herb, it is Gentile's morbid passion that discovers Catalina is still alive[38]. Gentile declares to her that God granted him divine grace "che da morte a vita mi v'ha renduta, essendone cagione l'amore che io v'ho per adrieto portato [of restoring you to life from death on account of the love that I once bore you]"[39]. But God's agency is distant, only a brake upon Gentile's desire to possess her completely. If the abbot of Elissa's tale uses religion to cloak his erotic designs, Lauretta's listener senses that religion anchors for Gentile a morality that informs his conscience, or, in Freud's language, his superego.

In fact Gentile's conscience or superego leads him to stage the banquet that eventually restores Catalina to Niccoluccio. The banquet scene is theatrical and artificial. The controlling moralism saps Gentile's actions of spontaneity, unlike in the previous tomb-stories, in which Andreuc-

[36] Ivi, p. 720; 10.4.10.
[37] M. de France, *Eliduc*, in *Lais bretons (xiie-xiiie siècles) : Marie de france et ses contemporains*, ed. N. Koble and M. Séguy, Honoré Champion, Paris 2018, lines 669-671: "… ma duce amie …Vus estes ma vie e ma morz…".
[38] She is revived in the end through the agency of Eliduc's wife, who sees one weasel reviving another with the help of this plant. In a comedic ending, the wife recognizes the power and worth of Eliduc's love for her and the two lovers are reunited.
[39] McWilliam, *op. cit.*, p. 721; 10.4.17.

cio, the abbot, and Cavalcanti respond to the unexpected with – to use Calvino's term – *leggerezza*.

Gentile tells the assembled throng that he will follow "una usanza di Persia [a Persian custom]" (10.4.24; 28) by showing those gathered the one thing dearest to his heart. But first he says to them:

> Ma prima che io faccia questa, vi priego mi diciate quello che sentite d'un dubbio il quale io vi moverò. Egli è alcuna persona la quale ha in casa un suo buono e fedelissimo servidore, il quale inferma gravemente; questo cotale, senza attendere il fine del servo infermo, il fa portare nel mezzo della strada, né più ha cura di lui; viene uno strano, e mosso a compassione dello 'nfermo e' sel reca a casa e con gran sollicitudine e con ispesa il torna nella prima sanità.
>
> But before doing this, I would ask you to give me your opinion upon the problem that I am about to place before you. A certain person has in his house a good and most loyal servant, who falls seriously ill; the gentleman in question, without waiting for the ailing servant to breathe his last, has him thrown on to the street and no longer cares for him; and then a stranger comes along who, feeling compassion for the invalid, conveys him to his house, where, with much loving care and much expense, he restores him to his former state of health.[40]

Which person, then, Gentile asks them, has the rights over this servant: the first one, who cast him out, or the second, who restored him to health?

When Niccoluccio, answering for the group, declares the first *signore* has lost all rights over the servant, Gentile introduces Catalina and her baby son. Catalina obeys Gentile's instructions and does not respond to their surprise; indeed, one says she appears mute ["ella ne par mutola" (10.4.34)]. Gentile takes command again, securing their patience to identify her "sol che voi mi promettiate, per cosa che io dica, niuno doversi muovere del luogo suo fino a tanto che io non ho la mia novella finita [provided that you all promise not to move from your places, not matter what I may say, until I have finished telling my story]." The promise granted, he continues to conclude his analogy:

> Signori, questa donna è quello leale e fedel servo […] la quale, da' suoi poco avuta cara e cosí come vile e piú non utile nel mezzo della strada gittata, da me fu ricolta e colla mia sollicitudine e opera delle mani la trassi alla morte; e Iddio, alla mia buona affezion riguardando, di corpo spaventevole cosí bella divenir me l'ha fatta Gentlemen, this lady is the faithful and loyal servant…

[40] Ivi, p. 722 (revised); 10.4.26.

> Being little prized by her own people, she was cast like something vile and useless into the gutter, whence I myself retrieved her, and by dint of my loving care I removed her from death's grasp with my own hands. And in recognition of my pure affection, God has transformed her from a fearsome corpse into something so beautiful.

Gentile therefore claims her as his own: "questa donna meritamente è mia, né alcuno con giusto titolo me la può radomandare [this lady belongs to me as of right, and no one can lawfully demand her return]"[41].

The listeners are struck dumb, and all, including Catalina, wept with compassion ["di compassion la grimavano"] (10.4.41). But then Gentile leads her and the child to Niccoluccio, and says, "Leva sú, compare; io non ti rendo tua mogliere, la quale i tuoi e suoi parenti gittarono via, ma io ti voglio donare questa donna mia comare con questo suo figlioletto, il qual son certo che fu da te generato e il quale io a battesimo tenni e nomina'lo Gentile [Stand up, my friend: I do not restore your wife to you, for she was cast out by both your and her kinfolk; but I wish to present you with this dear lady, together with her little child, of whom you are assuredly the father and whom I as his godfather held at his baptism and named him Gentile]"[42]. Lauretta allows Gentile a remarkable level of control: he demands others be silent while he re-titles Catalina a new lady with a new son, whom he has named after himself. The child is a genuine godson, born with divine grace from the tomb.

Like Elissa's abbot, he dramatically stages their return from death to life, from darkness to light. But here, in Lauretta's story, there appears no religious setting or priestly agency. It occurs at a banquet, a Bolognese feast. More critically, Gentile rewrites the story. He tells his listeners that Catalina's family and that of Niccoluccio discarded and failed to help her. That becomes the basis of his claim to her as a latter-day good Samaritan. But Lauretta recounts earlier that a doctor adjudged her dead, and that her relatives "dopo molto pianto la sepellirono [after many tears … buried her]" (10.4.7). She was mourned and entombed.

How should readers and listeners understand Gentile's revisions? If, as suggested earlier, speech indicates life, and silence, death, how do these associations rhyme with his words and actions, which bring Catalina back to the world in a proclaimed feat of generosity [*magnificenzia*] (10.4.4)? Yet Gentile has in fact erased and altered the record and submerged it in silence. Readers are faced with an apparent contradiction. They may notice that Gentile's version of events rewrites history in order to elide its darker,

[41] Ivi, p. 724 (slightly revised); 10.4.37-10.4.40.
[42] Ivi, p. 725 (revised); 10.4.42. Gentile calls Niccoluccio *compare* and Catalina *comare*, literally godfather and godmother.

more sinister features. His own actions and motives may appear to him like a bad dream, which he would forget through disguising them in the guise of false narrative. He will cast into silence the morbid pull of death. Absent – silenced – in his speech is his longing to see Catalina in the tomb, his kissing and embracing her body under the sway of a death-love or a love-death. Again, we can recall the two faces of Freud's goddesses of love and death.

The narrator Lauretta allows him this escape. She sounds instead the theme of compassion and gratitude. Niccoluccio "come meglio poté e seppe, ringraziò il cavaliere; e gli altri, che tutti di compassion lagrimavano [thanked Messer Gentile to the best of his power and ability. And the others, who all wept with compassion]", praised him, she says, repeating the phrase she used earlier[43].

Yet listeners and readers may feel a more complicated response and sense of a forced comedic ending. For what is the nature and object of the gathering's compassion? Is it pity or empathy; and is it felt for Catalina, Niccoluccio, or indeed Gentile? The *brigata* is only a few stories away from Dioneo's tale of Griselda, another woman reduced to silence and forced to grieve and then rejoice over the loss and return of her children from the dead. Lauretta's use of the tomb-symbolism here meditates upon the role of tombs in the earlier tales as places of silence, absence, and death, which the urge to love and live resists, voicing instead a delight at being in the world and embracing its vitality. In her story, speech and silence, love and death, womb and tomb, have a complex, intertwined relationship, like the twin faces of freedom and necessity represented, as Freud notes, by the "great Mother-goddesses…both goddesses of life and fertility and goddesses of death" (299).

Gentile is driven by a morbid love and then he silences that love for the dead through a moralizing tale, one that puts forward his conscience as superior to others. We may read this as the effort of the superego to mask and control the dark forces of the libido. Yet Lauretta's tale allows her readers to see this suppression. Gentile's attempt to define history and restrict its meaning paradoxically opens up a wider field of meaning. His simple moral fosters polyvalency and puzzlement over a single word, *compassione*, and over the meaning of the story as a whole[44]. He would display his generosity, and yet find himself, on account of his very human weakness, receiving pity as well.

As the story-telling concludes, have these tales helped to close the half-open tombs and cover the unburied dead from the book's introduction?

[43] Ivi, p. 725; 10.4.45.
[44] Cf. G. Zak, *"Umana cosa è aver compassione": Boccaccio, Compassion, and the Ethics of Literature*, in "I Tatti Studies", Vol. XXII, 1, 2019, pp. 5-20.

Lauretta's story sounds the chord of compassion, which is of course in the inception and opening movement of the work. The tomb-stories consider death and bereavement as a central focus of human care and concern. Characters fear death and seek to avoid it, while discovering its meaning as life's ultimate possibility. We live toward death, the stories suggest; our existence is rounded by it; our attempts to deny it heighten its force and fearsomeness. It leads us to hide from ourselves and disguise our inner life. Conversely, meditating – *commemoratio*, μελέτημα – on death intensifies our care for life. "Death is life's high mead", Keats wrote: it can grant us a poetic leap of perspective. Death confronts us all and so solicits our compassion as an *umana cosa*.

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