"`Do This In Remembrance of Me': Religion, Memory, and Art"

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Sculpting the "ebbing after-life of death" in Renaissance Italy

Abstract

This article traces signs of life in figural sculptures made in Italy between 1400 and 1550. It is inspired by a Victorian writer, Vernon Lee, who, during her encounters with Renaissance Italian statues, observed a quality she called the "ebbing after-life of death." The article establishes the quality as a conscious feature of Renaissance art, defining it through key art works that encouraged contemporary viewers to see and feel movement. Such works, it is argued, describe dying rather than dead bodies. A parallel examination of Renaissance texts reveals how these descriptions fit with contemporary tastes that saw the representation of death as "the most difficult of all to do." The classical inheritance will be considered by looking at literary accounts of "the last sinking into death" and the death sleep motif. Finally, Goethe's concept of Übergang helps explain how the "ebbing after-life" came to pass in viewers' imaginations.

Keywords

death – dying – thresholds – Renaissance – Italy – sculpture

1 Introduction

Most people in Renaissance Italy thought often about death and were actively encouraged to see a lot of it. Across the piazzas, preachers called for the faithful to go to as many deathbeds as possible: an act facilitated by the fact that most people died at home. The idea was that these deaths had to be seen to be believed, and then remembered. By witnessing death, it became more real, and so its corresponding image stayed more firmly in mind. As Mary Carruthers has shown in her seminal study on memory in the Middle Ages, the more vivid the image, the stronger its impression, and the longer it could be available for recall as-and-when necessary. A powerful image of a person dying could therefore be used as a reference point to prompt contemplation of death during prayer or any other daily activity.

This article is about the relationship between life and art. It considers how artists tried to replicate "real" deaths—that is, deaths from life—in order to make their works more vivid and memorable. While it is largely rooted in work already done to establish the importance of the contemplation of death in Renaissance Italy, it is also grounded in the way vitality is described in early art criticism—particularly in a treatise on art written by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435 (and first published in 1450). In this text, Alberti observes how artists should strive to mimic nature by encouraging feelings of empathy in the viewers: "one can find nothing more covetous than her [nature] regarding [emotions] similar to ourselves—that we cry with those who cry, we laugh with those who laugh, we grieve with those who suffer" (Alberti 61). He goes on immediately to write that implied motion reveals and demarcates these feelings: "these motions of the mind are known from movements of the body" (Alberti 61). The idea here is simple: the movements of the body help signal what is going on (Land 12). Successful indication of movement can help distinguish: standing from running, smiling from laughing, and so on.

It can also, then, set apart death from dying: a completed state as opposed to a present action. The aim of the article is to better understand how sculptors created a sense of movement to signal that dying was happening in the present. It begins by introducing the aesthetic tastes surrounding the representation of death, before clarifying how the description of the process of dying and the imminence of death is an artistic choice. It then considers the association between sleep and death and the representation of death as slumber. Finally, there is an analysis of the moment of death in relation to the operation of Übergang: a term invented by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the nineteenth-century to describe a peak of action and emotion.

The theme of liminality that draws these aspects together is identified in the work of another nineteenth-century writer, Vernon Lee: an author of ghost stories and aesthetic treatises who, while living in Italy, discerned in the sepulchral statues around her a quality she referred to as "the gentle and harmonious ebbing after-life of death" (Lee, *Euphorion* 234). Though not a strictly accurate description of the final traces of life surveyed in this article—that by definition of course occur just before not after death—when taken in the romantic, elegiac sense intended, it is a perfect expression of the sense of a life hovering on a threshold that can be captured in a sculpture and endure in a viewer's imagination.

2 The most difficult thing of all to do

In his treatise on art, Leon Battista Alberti wrote that the depiction of death, specifically dead bodies, was the painters' greatest challenge. He made the claim after describing a work by a classical Roman sculptor who had apparently met the challenge admirably:

> One praises, among Romans, a *historia*, in which dead Meleager is carried and those who are close at hand seem to be afflicted and work with all members. Without doubt, in him who is dead there is not any member that appears alive: namely, that all [the members] hang down, the hands, the fingers, the neck; all descend down languidly. Briefly, all contribute to express the death of the body; [a condition] which is certainly the most difficult of all. In fact, it so concerns an excellent artist to represent in a body members completely at rest as to render them all active and doing something. (Alberti 57)

Alberti's claim about the superlative difficulty of the painters' task is not pure hyperbole. In *De pictura*, Alberti uses the phrase "most difficult" sparingly: only the more general pursuit of beauty is described in the same terms. Of all the challenges facing painters, he truly considers the painting of dead bodies to be an exceptionally difficult one.

Two of sixty-three passages in *De pictura* are dedicated to the subject of movement in living creatures. These two passages help the painter who wants "the images to appear alive" (Alberti 73). But there are only two lines of equivalent practical instruction for the painter who wants the images to appear dead:

> they say that there is death when the members are no longer able to sustain vital duties, namely, movement and feeling. (Alberti 58)

> In every painting, therefore, one needs to observe this: that…the members of the dead appear lifeless to a hair, but indeed all [the members] of the living [appear] active. (Alberti 57-58)

Alberti describes dead bodies only in negative terms: they are *not* moving, they are *not* feeling, they are *not* alive. This instruction is in a sense helpful, as it could inspire painters to produce the drooping, lifeless bodies—like the Roman Meleager cited above—that express a total absence of life. However, as will be shown, the total absence of life is not a universal feature of Renaissance art. In fact, it is not really a feature at all. Furthermore, the circulation of Alberti's treatise was limited and so it is unlikely artists were responding directly to Alberti's injunctions.

Instead, the entirely "at rest" sculpture commended by Alberti appears to be an outlier—and an ancient example at that. If we look to the images directly for evidence of how contemporary Renaissance artists tackled the subject of death, many in fact include traces of restlessness. Alberti's claim that the representation of a body "entirely at rest" is the "most difficult of all to do" is largely a product of his own making, since so much of his treatise praises liveliness and related qualities, a vocabulary that spread through artistic circles to become a key feature of art appreciation. In this context, it is not surprising contemporary sculptors would eschew representations of lifelessness.

Given the lack of a consistent or reliable Renaissance discourse, the article hopes to contribute to a better understanding of certain trends in the portrayal of death primarily through visual analysis. This is also necessary because such writings as there are on the representation of death from later in the Renaissance—in the sixteenth century—seem to imply an interest in depictions of still somehow lively bodies as opposed to bodies that are inert—in other words, seems to imply an interest in illustrating the procedure of dying rather than the completed state of death. In Giorgio Vasari's *Le Vite de'più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori*, first published by the Florentine Torrentino press in 1550, and comprehensively revised and expanded in 1568, Giorgio Vasari goes as far in his pursuit of

lively death as to give life to a decapitated corpse. Writing about "the beautiful attitudes" in Michelangelo's fresco of *Judith and Holofernes* (circa 1509) on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Vasari focuses on the not-quite-dead body of the latter figure:

> the headless, quivering body of Holofernes appears, while Judith places the severed head in a basket that one of her elderly maids carries on her head...keeping her hands on this burden, she tries to cover it up, and, turning her face towards the body which, although dead, lifts an arm and a leg...the woman reflects in her expression...her dread of the dead man: this is truly a very highly thought-of painting. (Vasari 36)

A similar account of the movements associated with dying is in Vasari's description of another fresco on the Sistine Chapel ceiling—the *Brazen Serpent* (circa 1511):

> In this picture the different modes in which death seizes the sufferers is rendered vividly apparent; many of those not yet dead are obviously hopeless of recovery; others die convulsed with the fear and horror which that acrid venom has caused them. Many are throwing up their arms in agony; some appear to be paralysed; unable to move, they await their coming doom; and in in other parts are beautiful heads, giving utterance to cries of desperation, and casting backwards in the horrors of hopeless anguish. (Vasari 36)

Vasari's descriptions of dying bodies can be found not only in his writing on Michelangelo's works. In his "Life of Piero della Francesca," Vasari devotes several lines to the *Legend of the Cross* frescoes (circa 1452-66) in San Francesco, Arezzo. Among the "many beautiful conceptions and attitudes" in this cycle, Vasari notes there is a particularly well-done "dead body" that is being "restored to life at the touch of the Cross" (Vasari II.262). And in his "Life

of Titian," Vasari describes the deathly attitude of a fallen soldier in a lost painting depicting the *Martyrdom of Saint Peter* (circa 1527-29):

> making there the said holy martyr larger than life in a forest of very large trees, fallen to the ground and furiously assailed by a fierce soldier who has wounded him so grievously in the head that, being half alive (*semivivo*), one sees in his face the horror of death, while in another friar, who moves forward in flight, one sees the terror and fear of death. (Vasari IX.156)

In both cases—in Piero della Francesca's fresco and Titian's painting—Vasari is impressed by bodies that are between life and death: the former, being resurrected; the latter, dying. He admires these bodies on thresholds.

There is surely a link between the lack of instruction for representing dying bodies and the admiration for successful representations of dying bodies, as if perhaps, in macro terms, the latter depends on innovation: a quality increasingly associated with the newly popular concept of the independent, inventive artistic genius. It is not, as Vasari, points out, an easy thing to do—to describe the passage of time in a single figure. The rest of this article will consider a few of the ways sculptors took on the challenge.

3 Last sinking into death

In a study of sculpted depictions of wounded figures in classical Greece, Brunilde Ridgway explains how, when illustrating death, as when illustrating most subjects, sculptors had to then, and must still now, choose a single frame to represent:

> Sculpture…makes its claim upon [the viewer's] sense of vision, capturing and immobilizing one aspect, and one alone, of [the] process of dying. In keeping with the static nature of its medium, it may choose to portray the easiest aspect of all, the stillness of death. Or…it may devise a compositional pattern or pose expressing pain, physical disability, sorrow, the imminence of death. (Ridgway 47)

These expressive compositional patterns and poses represent the imminence of death in single frames.

Statues arguably lend themselves to the portrayal of the imminence of death more than paintings on the grounds that a life-size sculpted figural statue has greater capacity to evoke pathos. Viewers can empathize more readily with statues than with paintings because the material presence of sculpture invites an immediate embodied response that is less immediate with painting because of the incongruity between the two-dimensions of the (perceived) object and the three-dimensions of the (perceiving) subject. Though paintings can also elicit compassion and connection, statues configured to represent behaviors, if not more frequently, at least more explicitly, encourage viewers to both see and feel implied dynamic qualities, such as the imminence of death. The key is that in their three-dimensionality statues can be made to behave as if they were alive—even as they show an agonizing death.

The capacity of sculptors to affect viewers in this way was noted in the Renaissance by the Florentine writer Anton Francesco Doni who, in the mid-sixteenth century—in the context of the *paragone* debate centering on the relative merits of sculpture and painting—argued the former's superiority by invoking the famous *Laocoön*. Statues, Doni maintains, advancing an argument typical of those midcentury *paragone* disputants contending the preeminence of sculpture, are better than paintings because they present several different views of the same subject and therefore have greater expressive potential.

Statues can express the death of their subject in two ways: they can give a sense of time halted, producing images that evoke the moment of death; or they can give a sense of time passing, producing images that evoke the experience of dying, or the moments surrounding the moment of death. These two ways of representing death were employed in Hellenistic Greece when, according to Ridgway, sculpture began to be imbued with a "full surge of pathetic and dramatic feeling" that manifested in varied poses, "from the quiet scheme of the dying trumpeter in the Capitoline Museums, Rome, to the explosive fall of the Gaul in Venice" (Ridgway 53). The "dying trumpeter" from Rome is better known today as the *Dying Gaul* (fig. 1). The "Gaul in Venice" is better known today as the *Falling Galatian* from the *Galati Grimani* group, now in the Museo Archeologico, Venice (fig. 2). While the death of the *Dying Gaul* is solemn and slow, that of the *Falling Galatian* is strong and dynamic. Both deaths are staggered, but the latter bold portrait holds steady at the threshold so that viewers are given a sense of an end, while the former hesitant portrait wavers on the brink of death so that viewers are given a sense of an ending.

I suggest that, following ancient precedent, some fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian sculptors chose not to portray what Ridgway calls "the easiest aspect" of the process of dying: "the stillness of death" or the time after the process of dying has finished or death without even a trace of life and so beyond even the sleep of death. Moreover, I propose that some works of art that at first glance appear entirely static and lifeless might be animated by the viewers' gaze because of an innate human inclination to imbue figural sculpture with life.

An example of a work that comes close to representing total stillness is Jacopo della Quercia's effigy of Ilaria del Carretto (circa 1406-08) in San Martino, Lucca (fig. 3). The English art critic John Ruskin visited Lucca in the mid-1840s and was captivated by the statue. In a letter dated May 6, 1845, Ruskin told his father how he sat with Ilaria in the evenings:

"When the rose tints leave the clouds I go and spend a quarter of an hour beside the tomb" (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 122). In the same letter, Ruskin describes his experience of the effigy's static beauty, noting "the solemnity of the seal of death which is set upon the whole figure" (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 122). The phrase "seal of death" intimates that Ruskin considers the effigy to be a stable image of death: death set in stone.

However, there is a line in his initial note to his father that complicates the interpretation and suggests Ruskin did also perceive a trace of life in Ilaria's portrait. At the end of his commentary on the effigy, he explains how it appears to him to be almost moving: "you expect every instant, nay rather you seem to see every instant, the last sinking into death" (Ruskin, *Modern Painters* 122). He also describes this sense of motion and life passing in his autobiography, *Praeterita*, published over forty years after his first trip to Lucca. In only a few lines, Ruskin associates the effigy with movement three times: with "breathing womanhood," with "rising and setting" stars, and with undulating water ("the river wave") (Ruskin, *Praeterita* 220).

For most viewers, Renaissance, modern (nineteenth- and twentieth-century) and contemporary, the hint of movement in Ilaria's portrait (if perceived at all) is subtle. But the point is that Ruskin's writings reveal a trace of a widespread and deep-rooted instinct to see movement and therefore life in statues. In the case of Ilaria's effigy, this addition of motion marks the difference between reading the work as a lifelike portrayal of the steady state of death and reading it as a depiction of the passing from life to death. But implied motion is present more obviously in other Renaissance statues that are more explicitly representations of moments of transition as opposed to representations of stillness in death. Instead of stillness, they portray what Ridgway submits to be the harder aspect of the operation of death: the motions, dramatic or slight, that occur before the very end.

Modern viewers of Renaissance art aside from Ruskin paid attention to suggestions of life in statues that at first glance appear to be entirely lifeless and motionless. Vernon Lee was particularly sensitive to the last traces of life in fifteenth-century sculpted bodies, especially funerary effigies:

> As the Greeks gave the strong, smooth life-current circulating through their heroes; so did these men of the fifteenth century give the gentle and harmonious *ebbing after-life of death* in their sepulchral monuments. Things difficult to describe, and which must be seen and remembered. (Lee, *Euphorion* 234) (italics mine)

She develops this idea of an "ebbing after-life" in detailed descriptions of the languid elements in two Renaissance statues: Tullio Lombardo's effigy of Guido Guidarelli (1525) in the Galleria Nazionale, Ravenna, and Desiderio da Settignano's effigy of Carlo Marsuppini (circa 1543-64) in Santa Croce, Florence (figs. 4 and 5). Lee's *ekphrasis* is full of acute observations that can only come from observation of the works themselves. It takes close-looking to see that these effigies are not static but gently languishing. The subjects of the works have died, but Tullio Lombardo and Desiderio da Settignano have brought them back to life by representing them at the moment of their deaths, with just a little vitality still left in them. These vital details produce the impression of an "after-life" to which Lee refers.

There is a sense—especially when you see them in-person and in-the-round—that the Guidarelli and Marsuppini effigies depict men who are not perfectly dead. The mouth of Guidarelli's effigy is slightly open; his head, weighed down by his helmet, is awkwardly tilted and does not quite reach his pillow; and, while his eyelids are not perhaps "half-closed" as Lee describes them, the gentle fall of his long delicate lashes and the sliver of eye visible beneath them indicate that his eyes are not fully shut. Marsuppini's effigy, meanwhile, seems

to be holding the book on his chest tightly, and there is a little tension and animation left in his face, produced by his slightly raised chin and slightly parted lips. These quiet details tell us we are not looking at long-dead corpses but bodies on the brink of death.

The appreciation of falling and failing bodies in art has at least ancient precedent if not ancient origins. The description of death as a slow waning appears often in classical literature. For example, in the *Metamorphoses,* he describes the languorous demise of Thisbe's lover, Pyramus:

> 'It is thy dearest Thisbe calls thee! Lift
> thy drooping head! Alas,'—At Thisbe's name
> he raised his eyes, though languorous in death,
> and darkness gathered round him as he gazed (Ovid, *Metamorphosis* IV.143-46)

Virgil's *Aeneid* contains many slow and steady deaths—see for instance the death of the soldier Euryalus in Book IX:

> Euryalus rolled over in death, and the blood flowed
> Down his lovely limbs, and his neck, drooping,
> Sank on his shoulder, like a bright flower scythed
> By the plough, bowing as it dies, or as a poppy weighed
> Down by a chance shower, bending its weary head (Virgil IX.433-37).

The gradual decline of Euryalus's body is chronicled in real time and set pieces: from the initial rolling over, to the sinking of his neck onto his shoulder, to the final fall of his weary head.

In Book X of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas kills Lausus, the son of a king, and Lausus's death, as Michael Putnam has noted, is also cleverly paced: "After lines of unremitting

fury…culminating in the death of Lausus, we have a moment of quiet" (Putnam 136). This "moment of quiet" occurs when Aeneas contemplates the dying—not yet dead—body in front of him: "when [Aeneas] saw the face and features of the dying man (*morientis*), the features pale in marvelous ways, he groaned deeply from pity" (Virgil IX.821-24).

The most prolonged slow death of the *Aeneid* is described at the end of Book IV. Abandoned by her lover, Aeneas, Dido, Queen of Carthage, committed suicide by falling onto her sword on top of a pyre. Her sister, Anna, held her as she died:

> Vainly would Dido lift her sinking eyes,
> but backward fell, while at her heart the wound
> opened afresh; three times with straining arm
> turned skyward, seeking the sweet light of day,–
> which when she saw, she groaned. (Virgil IX.687-92)

In a long climactic scene that was well-known in Renaissance Italy, Virgil narrates the ebbing of life. Dido's death does not happen in an instant. He describes it as "long" and "difficult" (Virgil IX.693-94). As Charles Knapp points out, "Dido lingers between life and death" (Knapp 303).

A similar interest in slowly dying bodies can be found in classical descriptions of visual art. Pliny praised a sculpture by Cresilas of "a man wounded and dying" because, he observed, those who view it can feel how much energy has been painfully expended and "how little life is left" (Pliny XXXIV.74). The Augustan poet Propertius, "perhaps inspired by the memory of [an] effigy" he saw processed at her funeral, imagines being present at the Queen's death, watching "her limbs take in the hidden journey of slumber" (Curran 116). All these texts were known in Renaissance Italy. The *Metamorphoses* and *Aeneid* in particular

circulated widely in humanist circles, and both Ovid and Virgil were central figures in the culture of the Renaissance.

Given the impact of Antiquity on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian culture, it may be the case that the classical focus on slow deaths influenced what might be interpreted as a corresponding Renaissance interest in gently suffering, slowly failing bodies. In the fifteenth century, even Alberti—so apparently admiring of bodies "at rest"—stipulated that artists pay attention to the ways bodies move, especially how they "increase or diminish, when living beings in good health fall ill in some way, when they recover from an illness, when they change condition." (Alberti 64). Meanwhile, in his treatise, *The Figino*, published in the late-sixteenth century, Gregorio Comanini eulogized the Greek painter Aristides who was apparently "miraculous in expressing the gestures of the ill—their languishing, cravings, contortions, nausea, fainting, and other actions" (Comanini 94). Furthermore, he does so in the same passage as he praises Apelles's "images of the dying."

Earlier in the sixteenth century, in 1537, Pietro Aretino recalled in a letter a description of a *Pietà*, reported to him by his friend, the architect Sebastiano Serlio: "[Serlio] told me how languidly fall the limbs of the dead Christ...so that I have seen the affliction of the Mother and the misery of the Son before I have seen [the sculpture]" (Aretino 73). Serlio's eyewitness account of Christ's weak, languid limbs is powerfully evocative for Aretino, almost substituting for the sculpture itself. Even a second-hand report of a frail, languid body was sufficiently emotive eto encourage Aretino to empathize with the subtly implied movements of the sculpted body.

I propose that some Renaissance Italian effigies contain traces of life that imply movement and that this implied movement might have stimulated in some Renaissance viewers a sensation akin to that experienced by Ruskin when he stood in front of Ilaria's effigy:

a feeling that the subject of the statue before them was “sinking” into death. Because of the frequency of slow deaths in Greek and Roman literature, a Renaissance viewer familiar with the classical tradition would probably have been more likely to see this “sinking” of the effigy than would a viewer—modern, contemporary or otherwise—unacquainted with Greek and Roman texts.

The influence of Greek and Roman culture finds its way into the representation of death in Renaissance Italy in another way also: through the idea of the sleep of death.

4 The sleep of death

In Antiquity and Renaissance Italy alike, both sleep and death were believed to involve a loss of consciousness through reduction of sense perception. A first-century didactic poem by Lucretius eloquently details how life (“the spirit’s force”) dissipates into the body when a person falls asleep:

> sleep occurs when the spirit's force is scattered through the
>
> frame—
>
> So that some parts are cast abroad, and some parts of it keep
>
> Within, crowded together more, retreating way down deep—
>
> And only then do the limbs relax and slacken. (Lucretius V.915-28)

Lucretius’s description of the way a body falls into sleep is similar to classical descriptions of the way a body falls into death, since in both cases as the body loses consciousness, it is deprived of strength and vitality. This similarity between sleep and death is reflected in Renaissance art, where it is sometimes hard to tell if a statue is sleeping or dying or doing both. This ambiguity is deliberate. Some Renaissance Italian sculptors make use of the death

sleep motif to produce statues—mostly effigies—that seem to be suspended in an unidentifiable liminal unconscious state between life and death.

The association between sleep and death was ubiquitous in classical Antiquity. In Greek myth, Death (Thanatos) was the twin brother of Sleep (Hypnos), and the siblings were often represented together. In the context of funerary sculpture, Greek and Latin tomb inscriptions frequently equate sleep and death, as in the following epitaph for a Roman woman named Popilia: "Say that Popilia is asleep, sir; for it would be wrong for the good to die, rather they sleep sweetly" (cited in Lattimore 164). The close relationship between sleep and death appealed also to early Christians since it gave formal expression to their belief in resurrection. Like Christian death, sleep "is only temporary nonentity" (Lattimore 164). Many early Christian sarcophagi therefore include a sleeping figure, such as the prophet Jonah who is often shown resting under a tree having been vomited up by a giant fish that had swallowed him during a storm. Jonah's pose—one arm bent back behind his head—is taken from pagan representations of Endymion who in Greek mythology was made to sleep forever and thereby remain eternally young (fig. 6). Both the sleep of Endymion and the death of a good Christian held the promise of eternal life.

Alongside Endymion, the Cretan princess Ariadne is one of the most commonly represented sleeping figures in classical art. There are several versions of her story: in most she is lost, having been abandoned on the island of Naxos by her lover, Theseus; and then found, by the god Dionysius, asleep where Theseus left her. This moment of discovery is illustrated on several Roman sarcophagi where she is shown in a similar pose to Endymion—her right arm is lifted but her right hand usually falls across and over the head where Endymion's usually rests behind it (fig. 7). That this pose was associated with the pagan Ariadne was acceptable for early Christians because, like a good Christian death, Ariadne's

sleep represents a hopeful intermediate state between one life and the next. As Stine Birk has argued, her state of slumber is "an allegory of a hope for a happy existence after death": "the life that awaits her after her sleep is a joyous life among gods" (Birk 53). In a Christian funerary context, the allusion to the sleep of Ariadne could be consolatory, creating "an illusion of death as a non-definitive state" (McNally 154).

By the end of the fifteenth century, figures enacting variations of the gesture had been correctly identified as sleeping figures. These figures include Endymion and Ariadne as well as Eros and sleeping nymphs. And, even though, the strength of the gesture's associations with sleep were so strong in the Italian Renaissance that the famous statue now known as *Sleeping Ariadne* was misidentified as a representation of Cleopatra dying, she also had what Hans Henrik Brummer has referred to as a "second identity" as a sleeper (fig. 8) (Brummer 168). Phyllis Pray Bober and Ruth Rubinstein have highlighted how the stage design of the fountain—on which the sculpture was displayed at the Vatican in the early-sixteenth century—along with "the metaphors of sleep induced by soporific murmurings of water," meant that the *Sleeping Ariadne*'s "kinship with sleeping nymphs was never far from mind" (Bober and Rubinstein 125).

As already noted, the sleeping gesture was found on ancient sarcophagi as part of visual retellings of Ariadne's and Endymion's respective myths; and early Christians adopted the gesture for representations of the sleeping figure of Jonah, also on sarcophagi. But the classical gesture is rarely replicated in Renaissance Italian art, perhaps because it was considered to be somewhat awkward or unnatural. Instead of bending the right arm back behind the head, Renaissance artists opted instead to extend it—as in a relief showing Ariadne sleeping (circa 1518-19) by Giovanni da Udine where Ariadne's right arm is outstretched, resting on the shoulder of an attendant (fig. 9). Nor is the classical gesture

copied entirely in Andrea del Verrocchio's *Sleeping Youth* (circa 1475-80) at the Bode-Museum, Berlin (fig. 10). The raised-arm sleeping gesture is also missing in funerary contexts. To the best of my knowledge, there are no fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century sculpted effigies that hold an arm back behind their head to suggest they are unconscious.

What Renaissance Italian sculptors more commonly appear to retain of the antique sleeping pose is the arguably more natural gesture performed by the other arm, holding the weight of the rest of the body on a bent elbow. This bracing gesture implies that the subject still has some capacity to hold themselves up, as in Andrea Sansovino's pair of effigies of Cardinals Ascanio Sforza and Girolamo Basso della Rovere (circa 1505-07) in Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome (fig. 11). Since Ascanio's proper right arm holds his head up at some distance from his pillow, his effigy is more autonomous than his brother's, whose head rests on an arm that is supported by a tasseled pillow that is in turn resting on a draped marble plinth. The Popolo effigies' free arms, however, are posed almost identically, and neither in the raised antique manner. Instead, both arms elegantly follow the curves of their respective torsos, and the elbows of these arms rest on the statues' waists, while the slack hands on the bent wrists fall listlessly into the gaps between the two respective sets of crossed legs. By removing the antique arms that bend back behind heads into resting positions that articulate completed action and stability, and by replacing them with gently falling hands whose placements and general attitudes are less determined, Sansovino gives a delicate sense of incomplete action, of bodies caught slipping into a state of unconsciousness that is intentionally ambiguous, i.e., that could be either sleep or death or indeed something in-between (the metaphorical sleep of death).

This sense of fading is encouraged also by the Popolo effigies' crossed legs, another feature of antique sleeping figures retained by Sansovino: though in fact all antique

representations of Ariadne and Endymion have crossed legs, as do a number of effigies sculpted in Italy in the decades immediately before and after the installation of Sansovino's effigies in Rome. Many figural sculptures outside of Italy also have crossed legs: Panofsky's *Dying Gauls* for example. In a lecture on the funerary art of the Middle Ages, published in 1964, Panofsky proposes there are a group of knights' effigies in England that "represent the act of dying rather than the state of death" (Panofsky 56). "Those astonishing tombs of English thirteenth- and fourteenth-century knights," he writes, "have been nicknamed 'dying Gauls' because these valiant warriors are shown prostrate and *in extremis*, yet…attempt to draw their swords or even struggle with Death on a stony battlefield" (Panofsky 56). He pays attention to their crossed legs, noting that the pose implies animation and was "intended to distinguish a warrior dying in battle—and still alive—from a man who had breathed his last under less dramatic circumstances" (Panofsky 56). These crossed legs give a sense of movement, of bodies reclining but not fully at rest.

Etruscan and Etrusco-Roman effigies also include crossed legs, and these provide the more accessible prototype for Renaissance Italians. One early instance where an Etruscan funerary portrait directly influenced an Italian artist can be seen on the thirteenth-century "Nativity" scene in Nicola Pisano's *Baptistery Pulpit* in Pisa, where the image of Mary is based on reclining Etrusco-Roman effigies (fig. 12). They were also inspiration for some Italian sculptors of the early-sixteenth century. In the 1520s, for example, Baldassare Tommaso Peruzzi designed a monument for Francesco Armellini that includes a mattress design copied from Etruscan and Romano-Etruscan models (fig. 17). Indeed, the idea of having the main subject of the tomb reclining in the form of an effigy was borrowed from Etruscan or Romano-Etruscan funerary art, since these reclining figures on sarcophagi not based on Etruscan models were generally set on the side of sarcophagi in separate (though related) narrative

contexts. The crossed-legged effigy also has Greek associations and is sometimes said to be enacting the "Praxitelean pose" in reference to the easy crossed-legged postures held by many of the *Resting Satyr* group of statues by the Greek sculptor, Praxiteles.

Typically, early sixteenth-century Italian sculptors modelling their works on Etruscan and Etrusco-Roman funerary sculpture adapt the standard effigy design to make it less alert. Though Etruscan and Etrusco-Roman effigies recline, they are nevertheless awake, which we know because their eyes are open and their hands are doing things—see, for instance, the effigy of Seianti Hanunia Tlesnana (circa 250-150 BCE) at the British Museum, London (fig. 13). Her proper right hand adjusts her mantle while her proper left hand holds a mirror. I am not aware of any Renaissance Italian effigy that holds up a hand to adjust a piece of clothing, nor any Renaissance Italian effigy that holds up a hand to rest behind its head. However, some Renaissance Italian effigies recline while holding objects, even if these objects are not mirrors. These effigies display what Vernon Lee—when describing the effigy of Carlo Marsuppini—called a "last clinging to the things beloved in this world" (Lee, *Euphorion* 236) (fig. 5).

As Lee points out, the particular "thing" that Marsuppini clings to is a book, and the holding-a-book-while-reclining figure was another motif borrowed from Etruscan and Romano-Etruscan funerary art. Most Italian Renaissance reclining effigies are Neapolitan: see, for example, the tomb of Don Ramón Folch de Cardona (circa 1524), though today installed in the church of Sant Nicolau in Bellpuig, Spain, was made by the Neapolitan sculptor Giovanni Marigliano (fig. 14). Some Neapolitan reclining effigies sit up on one elbow with a book open in their hands. The accumbent reader was less popular outside of Naples. A drawing (circa 1515) with a design for a funerary monument—possibly for João II of Portugal and possibly by Sansovino, now at the Uffizi, Florence—is a rare example of a design for a non-Neapolitan

Italian funerary monument that shows an effigy with reading as an attribute. However, the design was never realized (fig. 15).

Outside of Naples, books are usually held by figures who are unconscious or nearly unconscious. The already-mentioned effigy of Francesco Armellini (1528) in Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome, for instance, shows the subject falling into a state of slumber, with his eyes closed, his head dropping onto his shoulder (fig. 16). His finger has been caught between the pages of a book as though unconsciousness has interrupted his reading, and so the book becomes a motif indicating transience. A sense of "clinging" to things is evident too on the fully recumbent effigy (circa 1500-30) of an unknown lady in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (figs. 17 and 18). Though her eyes are shut, she gently presses her fingers into her pillow.

There is evidence that such sleeping-dead figures provoked in some contemporary viewers a response similar to Lee's, where their final efforts—Dylan Thomas's last rages against the dying of the light—are keenly felt. In the early-sixteenth century, a poet calling himself "Prospettivo Melanese depictore" described his emotional reaction to a statue of a *Dead Niobid*: "lying down on the ground, as if overcome by slumber; ah! how often he [the statue] makes tears trickle down from my eyes!" (Settis 26). The humanization and associated animation of the work is here communicated by the use of the pronoun "he" instead of "it" or "the statue."

It is possible that the idea of depicting unconscious figures performing subtle actions was inspired by ancient representations of sleepers, such as the figure of Endymion on a marble sarcophagi at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, whose protagonist grasps an unidentified tubular object gently between his middle and index fingers (fig. 19). This gesture connotes corporeal agency because, as highlighted in contemporary medical texts,

including works by Galen, fingers at rest do not grasp. A similar gesture is performed by Christ's right hand in Michelangelo's *Pietà* (circa 1498-1500) (fig. 20). Though Michelangelo probably did not know of either of these particular sarcophagi, and may therefore have devised the detail independently, it is also possible that he saw the gesture on similar works and in the *Pietà* adapted it for use on a dead rather than a sleeping body.

The ability of ancient sculptors to describe unconscious subjects as gently dynamic, with lively but measured gestures and poses, may have inspired some Renaissance Italian sculptors. It is sometimes difficult to discern whether the subjects of Renaissance effigies are asleep or awake, alive or dead, and this ambiguity was perhaps partially inherited from the ancient tradition and its subtle depictions of vital signs in dying bodies. On the other hand, Renaissance artists observed the ambiguity in the ancient treatment of sleep because of their own interests. There is a selective system at work in their imitation of the model that was guided by a contemporary Renaissance interest in the blurring of boundaries between life and sleep, life and unconsciousness, and life and death.

The blurring of boundaries between life and death through the idea of the sleep of death is therefore another way Renaissance Italian sculptors found to describe the "ebbing after-life of death" observed by Lee. But where the sleep of death was a gentle portrayal of the moment of death, with soft, rounded edges, an alternative approach was to crystallize the moment, fortify its borders and encourage viewers to witness the "ebbing after-life" for themselves, in their imaginations.

5 Not gone but going (*Übergang*)

Übergang was a term used by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the nineteenth century to refer to the depiction of a peak of action in art. It is like, but not precisely synonymous with, "culmination." *Übergang* translates into English as something like "passage" or "crossing," and so, unlike "culmination," denotes a moment of transition as well as climax.

Several hundred years before Goethe, Renaissance Italian artists described *Übergang* in some statues of dying bodies that are posed on the threshold between life and death—caught at the peak of the process of dying. The discussion will center on the *Laocoön* statue and responses to it, both Renaissance and post-Renaissance, since the *Laocoön* and the debates surrounding it offer a way of understanding *Übergang* and the difficulties associated with the sculptural representation of the "ebbing after-life of death."

Goethe pointed to the *Laocoön* as a work that exemplifies *Übergang* because, he maintained, it shows a suspended moment of transition: "I would describe the statue as a frozen lightning bolt, a wave petrified at the very instant it is about to break upon the shore" (Goethe 18) (fig. 21). The *Laocoön* was unearthed in Rome in January 1506 and was promptly displayed in the Vatican sculpture garden as an ancient wonder to behold. Attributed by Pliny the Elder to three Greek sculptors, the statue depicts the violent deaths of the eponymous Trojan priest and his two sons, as narrated in Book II of Virgil's *Aeneid*:

> *At first* each snake entwines the tiny bodies
> of his two sons in an embrace, *then* feasts
> its fangs on their defenseless limbs. The pair
> *next* seize upon Laocoön himself,
> …He struggles with his hands to rip their knots,
> his headbands soaked in filth and in dark venom,
> *while* he lifts high his hideous cries to heaven,

just like the bellows of a wounded bull

when it has fled the altar… (Virgil II.300-312) (italics mine)

Virgil's verse describes the deaths of all three men as unfolding in stages: "At first…"; "then…"; "next…"; "while…."

As some participants of the *paragone* dispute argued when putting forward a case for the relative merits of painting over sculpture, it may be harder for a sculptor to depict this unfolding than for a painter, for while the sculptor can present many views, they must normally choose a single stage to represent. In 1767, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Goethe's near-contemporary, described how a sculptor can begin to surmount this apparent problem by choosing to represent "the most fruitful moment"; the one that gives "free reign to the imagination;" the "pregnant moment" before the climax (Lessing 36).

Lessing maintained that the great achievement of the *Laocoön* sculptors was that they were able to represent just such a moment. In arguing his case, Lessing focused on *Laocoön*'s open mouth. Where others saw and heard a scream, and therefore a peak of action, Lessing saw and heard a sigh emitted before a scream: "[*Laocoön*] raises no terrible clamour…His mouth is not wide enough open to allow it, and he emits instead an anxious and oppressed sigh" (Lessing 36). As Ritchie Robertson has pointed out, Lessing believed that by describing the calm before the storm, the *Laocoön*'s sculptors encouraged viewers to "imagine how [*Laocoön*'s] pain would increase" (Robertson 259).

It might be argued that Lessing's view of the statue's strength is incompatible with medieval and Renaissance mnemonic theories that considered bold and striking images to be the most engaging. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium*—a Latin rhetorical treatise (dated circa 80 BCE and attributed to Cicero) popular in Renaissance Italy—told its readers how in everyday life we are affected by out-of-the-ordinary and extreme events:

> When we see…things that are pretty, ordinary, and banal, we generally fail to remember them, because the mind is not being stirred by anything novel or marvelous. But if we see or hear something exceptionally base, dishonourable, extraordinary, great, unbelievable, or laughable, then we are likely to remember for a long time. (*Rhetorica* III.22.37)

It goes on to advise that images should "imitate nature" and be striking if they are to be memorable:

> We ought…to set up images of a kind that can adhere longest in the memory. And we shall do so if we establish likenesses as striking as possible; if we set up images that are not many or vague, but doing something; if we assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness. (*Rhetorica* III.22.37)

Though the treatise circulated in large numbers form the early-fifteenth century on, and was later absorbed into humanist commentaries, these two passages are not cited in order to imply that all Renaissance Italian works of art and responses to them were shaped by the *Herennium*. The treatise was popular earlier in the Middle Ages also but did not directly inspire early medieval sculptors or viewers. These extracts are cited instead because they show that in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, images of violent extremes were not necessarily thought to curtail the imagination as Lessing propounds. The selections indicate that it was to some extent understood, at least by those who had read the *Herennium*, that such violent images could animate the imagination and encourage the mind to be resourceful. In Renaissance Italy, an image could at once represent a culmination *and* give room to the viewer's imagination; the Laocoön might have at once represented a culmination *and* given room to a viewer's imagination.

From a viewer's perspective, images like this waver on the brink: the subject is pictured dying, but at the same time the viewer can easily project forward a little to imagine them already dead. These wavering images therefore express *Übergang*.

Antique representations of the Greek hero Meleager can be associated with *Übergang*—with the idea that representations of his death show a moment of transition that might allow the viewer to imagine the hero's ensuing but unrepresented final state of unconsciousness. Two versions of Meleager's myth survive: the Homeric and the non-Homeric. The event of Meleager's death during a wild boar hunt is only mentioned in the non-Homeric version, described for example in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The non-Homeric death scene is found only on Roman sarcophagi, particularly on reliefs made after the second century BCE. These show the hero once or twice removed from the place he was killed, either being carried home or already home and surrounded by mourners on his deathbed. They are two of the most common images on Roman sarcophagi.

We saw that Alberti cited a Roman image of Meleager as a perfect representation of a dead body. Alberti's Meleager succumbs to death; his heavy body takes it all in. As Paul Zanker has highlighted, these statues offered "pathos of expression," which is in large part a result of the fact that the exhausted limbs are vestiges of the physical exertions associated with dying (Zanker 11). The "dangling arm" for instance "is a powerful pathetic motif" that signifies "giving up, succumbing" (Zanker 11). Antique representations of Meleager were apparently admired by some in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy because they emphasize and thereby lament the hero's current lack of vitality: "All strength has deserted [his] body" (Zanker 367).

This sense of dead weight may have been admired in classical sculpture but there are too few comparable Renaissance examples to suggest they actively tried to replicate or

imitate it. In fact, one of the great achievements of Roman sculptors, anticipating the preferences of the Renaissance, is that they were able to combine this impression of dead weight with a subtle sense of animation. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that the most commonly illustrated scenes of Meleager's death in ancient Rome—conveyed home after the hunt and on his deathbed—include representations of a dying rather than a dead body: the former depicting him injured and unable to carry himself home, the latter showing him receiving his final rites. Furthermore, there is perhaps no, certainly few, classical literary precedent for emphasizing Meleager's complete corporeal torpor. Ovid's famous account of Meleager's death, for example, does not include an account of Meleager's lifeless dead body and focuses instead on his last living moments:

> At the last, groaning with pain, [Meleager] names his aged father, his brothers, his loving sisters, the companion of his bed, and, it may be, his mother. The fire and the suffering flare up, and die away, again, and both are extinguished together. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII. 515-46)

Ovid narrates how Meleager suffers, "groaning with pain," until the last. He describes the ebbing of Meleager's life, ending with a description of a final sigh that "vanishes into the light breeze." Even this omission is described not as an accomplished fact but as a slow proceeding. Ovid specifies that it vanishes "gradually."

This ebbing of life is reflected in representations of Meleager on Roman sarcophagi. Many of these representations are in poor condition and details are therefore hard to read, but one notable exception is a fragment (mid second-century CE) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (fig. 22). Not quite *all* strength has deserted this dying hero. His body is indeed heavy and sinking toward the ground. But some movement is going

against gravity: he lifts his neck a little, pulling up and slightly away from his torso (fig. 23); his proper left arm lifts itself and stretches out to touch the proper right shoulder of an attending figure; and his bent index finger clings to some drapery (fig. 24). These details produce what Anna Marguerite McCann has described as “a keen sense of waning life” (McCann 61-66).

We can be sure this work was known at least in the late Renaissance because the heads of a few of the mourners were restored sometime in the early- or mid-sixteenth century, perhaps by Andrea Bregno in Padua. Because of this late and uncertain provenance, no direct link can be established between this fragment and works produced in Italy circa 1400-1550. Yet, depictions of Meleager were common on Roman sarcophagi and there are records of other Meleager sarcophagi known in fifteenth-century Italy (and before).

Moreover, the details of the Metropolitan *Sarcophagus* that impart vitality are not unique to it. There is, for example, another *fragment of a dying Meleager sarcophagus* in the Vatican Museums that includes similar signs of life. This Meleager also pulls his neck up and away from his torso; his mouth is also slightly open; and though his left hand does not cling to his attendant’s drapery, it is also active—there is a large gap between his wrist and his attendant’s back that suggests Meleager is lifting his forearm and caressing his attendant’s shoulder rather than resting on it. The sarcophagus shows Meleager apparently wavering around the cusp of death, about to slip finally into unconsciousness.

In Renaissance Italy, this cusp was represented most commonly in images of the Crucifixion—a subject that provided a good opportunity for some sculptors to show *Übergang* since Christ passed from life to death as he hung on the cross.

A sense of movement is a common feature of Renaissance crucifixes. For example, when working with a *Crucifix* by Giuliano da Sangallo, the conservator Gianluca Amato observed “a quiver of nervous and contracted tension:”:

> More than the delicate features, expressed in the emotional reserve of the face, the drama of the Crucifixion emerges from the interlacing physical stresses: the body, weighing only on the nails repeats the movement of the head, which stands out elegantly from the shaft of the cross. This articulation determines the natural torsion of the pelvis, breaking the figure's harmonious restraint and pushing the right leg forward. (Amato 322)

The elegant gap between Christ's head and "the shaft of the cross" creates for the viewer a sense that Christ's head is bowed, which in turn is an action that fits the description of Christ's death in the Gospel of John: "When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19.30). In this and many other fifteenth-century crucifixes, as in a Florentine example by Giuliano da Sangallo, Christ's neck is brought forward, toward his chest, but it is not yet shown resting here: there is often a gap between his chin and his torso that implies his head is still falling (fig. 25). In more than one work, the weight of Christ's head is pushing down toward his shoulder, so that for viewers, positioned below the figure, it would have felt as though Christ's head were falling toward them.

All this is not to say that Christ is still alive. The images evoke his suffering by making his death dynamic. They might not therefore be strictly theologically accurate in the sense that they could well show details out of narrative sequence. For instance, Christ might be shown with a side wound—inflicted to prove that he was dead—alongside one or two details hinting at animation or life before death. To imply that Christ might still be alive after the infliction of his side wound would carries significant theological implications; primarily, this would allow for the possibility that his resurrection was a revival from near-death rather than a revival from death—an idea that the Church was at various points keen to repudiate. However, some visual evidence indicates that multiple temporalities could be present in a

single figure, or at least that one could be dominant and another implied. In an anonymous *Crucifix* at San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, Christ has a side wound, but he is also looking directly out at the viewer, and his eyes are not just open but are locked into the viewer's line of sight and are actively engaged (fig. 26). Furthermore, as in many other Crucifixion statues, Christ's neck has not fallen to his chest and is therefore not entirely relaxed. In combining these living and dead features, the sculptor is not submitting that Christ is living, nor that he did not die. He is exaggerating the fact that Christ *did die* by making the death vivid and present. The side wound acts as a seal of confirmation. The image conflates two moments of the Passion narrative**.** However, this is not as theologically bold as might first appear; the image does not suggest that Christ bypassed death, rather it draws attention to the fact that he suffered, that is lived, through it.

The same combination of open eyes, open mouth and angled head can be seen too on sculpted busts, as in a polychromed terracotta statue of *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, perhaps by Agostino de Fondulis (fig. 27). There are similar contemporaneous terracotta busts that represent Christ preaching as he is led to the Cross that we are able to allocate confidently to a moment in the Passion before the crucifixion because they depict a rope around Christ's neck (Christ was forced to wear a rope on his way to Cavalry). In such works, the urgency of Christ's message is expressed through his jutting head—a feature that suggests he is leaning toward the viewer to be better heard, and that can be seen also in representations of John the Baptist preaching.

Though certainly animate to a degree, the *Man of Sorrows* does not seem to be evangelizing. His nearly-closed eyes point to gentle exhaustion, as does the fact that his head falls involuntarily to his right, toward his shoulder, rather than purposefully forward, toward the viewer. As Giancarlo Gentilini and David Lucidi observe for a similar bust by Fondulis,

Christ "appears in the throes of death, as if already nailed to the cross" (Gentilini 82). The deep wrinkles in his neck also intimate that he has already walked to Calvary. We could try to anchor this work to a specific moment in the Passion narrative. Yet, given its ambiguous temporalities, we would better understand how this bust and others like it function as devotional images if we acknowledge that they are not tethered to single events in the chronology of the Passion but evoke the Passion in its entirety by showing Christ both already dead and still alive—and therefore between life and death. This makes each statue larger than the sum of its parts.

Übergang is expressed as well in the figure of Christ in terracotta Lamentations. These life-size figural scenes display Christ's body in the middle of a crowd of mourners enacting gestures of grief. The intense motion and emotion exhibited by Mary and other mourning figures is often remarked upon in contemporary descriptions of terracotta Lamentations, particularly Niccolò dell' Arca's and Guido Mazzoni's. But Christ too can be physically demonstrative in these scenes. In a *Lamentation* by Alfonso Lombardi (circa 1522-26) in San Pietro, Bologna, Christ pulls back his neck as though in the midst of a death throe (fig. 28). He also raises one hand to his chest and holds another loose by his side, a gesture more commonly associated with dying than with death: see for instance its use on a bronze panel (circa 1516-21) by Andrea Riccio depicting the sickness and dying of a professor (fig. 29). This panel is part of series: a different gesture is used to signal the professor's death (fig. 30). The loose, drooping hand of Meleager on the ancient sarcophagus so admired by Alberti has here become a formalized motif. However, it is combined with the active presentation of the hand-on-chest to create an overall image of an ambivalent figural attitude increasingly characteristic of Renaissance Italy.

6 Conclusion

Renaissance Italian sculptors attempted to convey death as a transient event. Though by no means a comprehensive survey of these attempts, this article has presented a sample of cases and introduced some of their likely classical prototypes—Greek, Roman, and Etruscan. In regard to textual evidence, in the absence of explicit directives for portraying the process of dying, laudatory descriptions of dying bodies and the admiration of the quality of liveliness in Renaissance art more generally, when taken together, strongly suggest sculptors would aim to include some remnants of vitality in their representations of death. The visual evidence certainly backs up this claim, with signs of what Vernon Lee poetically and so perceptively referred to as “the ebbing after-life of death” in both details and full impressions of works. Given the role of dynamic images in medieval and Renaissance practices of remembering, and the associated importance placed on being able to recall these vivid images during contemplative practices, it is clear the images discussed should in theory have helped generate more productive prayer. The next step for this research is to confirm this function of the images beyond theory and in practice through systematic study of contemporary memory manuals (*ars memorativa*) and prayer books.

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