The Art of the Epitaph
By Mark Tyson

My grandfather died not too long ago. One question I found to be unrelenting and impossible to answer was how to honor him and the life he led—how to communicate my profound respect for him to others. As a writing student, and as a kid with death on his mind, I was affected by a notion John Jakle and Keith Sculle develop in their book chapter titled “Territorial Markers and Signs of Personal Identity”: “Cemetery markers represent another kind of sign, little thought of as such…with graves made into ‘resting places’ idealized as territory eternally possessed” (110). My difficulty with articulating my respect and love for my grandfather was compounded by the idea of the epitaph: a text (for better or for worse) that is enduring, that describes the person buried beneath the marker and reflects the cultural context of the period in which he or she lived. How can a sentiment be written that is both succinct and powerful, that does justice to the deceased, fully encapsulating his or her life achievements? As a student writer, I cannot imagine a more challenging and punishing task than having to write an epitaph, knowing that one day it may be all that is left of the subject’s station on this earth. Why do we even attempt to memorialize the dead in such a fashion?

The epitaph is paradoxical in nature. Although intended to memorialize the dead, the epitaph is “for the most part, the domain of the living,” according to Richard Bauman, the author of an article titled “Grave Commentary.” It seems rational for everyone to write his or her own epitaph, but, as Bauman points out, this is not a common practice in the United States. Perhaps this is because we still hold the deceased up to a standard of honesty; we, as the authors of epitaphs, cannot allow the former living to leave a misleading, boastful, or underwhelming autobiographical inscription behind. The living write about lives of the dead; the lives, extinguished, are judged by an external actor, and not always an actor with real authority on the matter. It appears that epitaphs are more for the living than the dead. We, the living, need the comfort of knowing that when we die we will be memorialized, and that our lives have been meaningful, and that even a stranger may pass by our graves and understand our importance.

Granted, I have ascribed a great deal of seriousness to the inscriptions etched on gravestones. Not all attribute such gravity to the epitaph, but this is not to say it still isn’t an art form. By ascribing such “graveness” to gravestone commentary, I have detracted from much of the light-heartedness and wit that can be found in graveyard rhetoric. Across the U.S., there are tombstones that give vignettes of the buried, and that ultimately comment on the culture at the time when the deceased lived. This is exemplified by an inscription found in Tombstone’s Boot Hill Cemetery:

Here Lays Butch.
We planted him raw.
He was quick on the trigger
But slow on the draw. (qtd. in Bauman)

Not only is the epitaph humorous, it is indicative of the time and community where the unfortunate gunslinger lived. From reading this epitaph, one can better understand Naco, Arizona, during the 1800s as an archetype of the “Wild West,” where gunfights were not infrequent. During this time, witnessing untimely deaths was common, and it can be inferred that these jovial epitaphs were a form of escapism, a way to cope with an environment characterized by hardship and brutality. In a Waynesville, North Carolina, cemetery, we are privy to true cemetery discourse (one epitaph is responded to by another):

Come blooming youths, as you pass by,
And on these lines do cast an eye.
As you are now, so once was I;
As I am now, so must you be;
Prepare for death and follow me.

And the rebuttal:

To follow you
I am not content.
How do I know
Which way you went? (qtd. in Bauman)

In addition to the lighthearted epitaph, over time, we have developed prefabbed phrases that are commonly used to memorialize the dead (e.g., “may he rest in peace,” “gone home,” “we will meet again”). Sentiments that can be found in gravestone catalogs have taken over most modern-day cemeteries in the U.S., not necessarily easing the pain brought on by a loved one’s death, but making the process of choosing the right thing to say about the deceased more expedient and less arduous. Poignant sentiments, once novel, thus become homogenized and standard, tidying up the concept of death and departure into stock expressions. In spite of these seemingly routine formulas that characterize grave markers today, the words evoke in those close to the deceased a profound connection.

Is selecting a pre-written epitaph any less meritorious than creating your own? Maybe, just as we can glean some information about Naco, Arizona, in the 1800s from the inscription on the grave in Tombstone’s Boot Hill Cemetery, we can also use the formulaic epitaphs of today to better understand our society. In today’s society, the lengthy epitaph is, for the most part, extinct. Its disappearance is indicative of the fast pace of modern life, our emphasis on expediency, and the fact that, in general, we have found many ways to circumvent the tedium of difficult endeavors (e.g., paging through gravestone catalogues to discover a suitable epitaph). Thus, it is hard to say that the epitaph has lost its merit, as it still provides us with so much information with so few words.

In the United States, the dead take up a great deal of real estate. Communities invest a lot of time and money in cemetery layouts, markers, designs and burials. Why invest so much in a ritual when the subject it celebrates is no longer “with us,” who has nothing tangible to contribute to society? But life is more than the living. Mankind has long patterned some of its most important behavior after the dead and in the name of the dead.

Epitaphs range from humorous aphorisms to very serious meditations on religion and death, and undoubtedly, like any form of rhetoric, they mean something slightly different to everyone. However, I do think the practice of memorializing the dead with inscriptions is very telling, not just about those who have passed, or about the author, but about the human race. Not only can epitaphs capture various zeitgeists, they illustrate the human condition and what it seems we have always strived for: symbolic immortality. Epitaphs establish to the living that when they die that they too will have words “set in stone” about them and they will be remembered. That people care about them and their various endeavors, and that their life was of importance.

Works Cited