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Personhood and Authorship. The Dead Body as Lieu de Mémoire

A Theoretical Experiment A'Propos Bentham's Auto-icon

According to his last will, Jeremy Bentham's body was dissected and mummified after his death on 6th June, 1832, and was posited onto his favourite chair in a cupboard-like box. Because the mummification of the head was unsuccessful, it was substituted with a wax head: on some photos of the *auto-icon* – as Bentham called it – the original head is put in between his two legs to increase the morbid impression. The humorous overtone is further enhanced by the legends attached to the separated head: it was stolen several times, once it was found in a luggage locker, some people played football with it, etc.

The real reason why Bentham decided to treat his dead body like this (already in his twenties) remains unknown, but the object (?) or cultic object (?) or person (?) touches on several questions of all the scholarly fields that consider Bentham as a predecessor: i.e. philosophy, law and psychology.[1]

He regularly took part, the legend says, on the basis of his testimony in the University College Council sessions where, the minutes prove, he is "present, but not voting." The problematic nature of the *auto-icon* is made evident already by the fact that it is mostly referred to with the personal pronoun "it," which means he (it) is mostly considered an *object* whereas if he is "present but not voting," he must be a *person* who could vote, but does not want to.

To what extent then does the term *person* and all the rights and legal capacities related to it mean the living person, and to what extent is the living person to be related to the living body? Can the concept of the *person* be captured in

1 https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bentham-project/about-jeremy-bentham/auto-icon Accessed April 09, 2025

connection with different forms of the dead body (like a mummy, a skeleton, or rotting body) in the semantic context of the self?

The cadaver of the judge of Lőcse

In the famous novel, *The Black City* [*A Fekete város*] (1910) by the great Hungarian writer, Kálmán Mikszáth, the council meeting in Lőcse, a town in the northern region of historic Hungary, is held *praesente cadaver*, that is in the presence of the shrouded cadaver of the judge previously shot dead. Without going deeper into the storyline, which is not uninteresting from the aspect of our topic since the main motif is the archaic legal practice of obtaining legal capacities by the blood of a dead body, it can be stated that, although the situation is very similar to the Bentham story, the case is basically very different:

> ...what I can see officially is that the judge of Lőcse is present, but his soul is not present, hence, I, as the wisest counsellor in the name of our laws, open the session *instead of* him. How the head of this community was deprived of his soul the eyewitness András Nustkorb is to be called upon to tell you to whom I hereby pass the word. (Translation and emphasis mine)

> ...én csak azt látom hivatalosan, hogy a lőcsei bíró jelen van, de a lelke nincs jelen, minélfogva, mint legbölcsebb tanácsnok, *helyette* én nyitom meg törvényeink szerint a mai ülést... Hogy miként fosztatott meg lelkétől e tisztes gyülekezet feje, ezt, mint szemtanú, Nustkorb András tanácsnok uram van hivatva elmondani, kinek is átadom a szót. (Mikszáth Kálmán: A f*ekete város*, 86) (Emphasis mine)

To reveal whether Mikszáth knew the Bentham case, which seems most probable, should be the theme of another study.

However, the difference between the two cases is especially emphatic because of their similarity.

Bentham's body is present as a person with legal capacities, which indirectly takes us closer to the concept of the *self* than the dead body of the judge of Lőcse,

who, because of the lack of his *soul,* is only a body, much more than the *auto-icon* to whom personal rights seem possible to be related. Although Bentham's soul is not present, it does not seem to come into question from the aspect of his function, either. Actually, one of the interesting points itself is why the *soul* does not come into the scope.

According to the text, the judge of Lőcse can and should be substituted, i.e. he is not present in the way Bentham is, but he seems to have legal capacities if not capacities to act, since he is to be substituted. Although only living persons can possess legal capacities in legal terms, I wish to use the concept in relation to the term of *existence* deduced from the idea of substitution. Although legal capacities can only be related to the living, substitution can also only relate to living people. More precisely: only those people can be substituted who do exist.

What is then the role of the presence of the dead body? Evidently, it is not only a *corpus delicti,* a proof of the crime, but also an official embodiment of an institution, i.e. of the *function of the judge of* Lőcse, even if he is dead.

But if he is present in the function of the judge of Lőcse, why should he be substituted as if he were not present? Bentham, as it were, should not be substituted, because he is "present but not voting."

Can the institution of the judge be defined by the body of the deceased person? If so, why cannot he vote or make other legal decisions as Bentham's *auto-icon*? According to the text, the reason is his missing soul. The possible answer seems more and more complicated, because, according to this, the legal right to vote is to be related to the soul. Without going into the multidimensional issue of "what is the soul?", we still can put the question: is it the *soul* or is it *life* that makes the body possess legal rights?

There definitely is a humorous overtone in putting the judge's covered dead body in the centre of a session, although at least he (it) is treated with more piety and dignity than Bentham, since a lying position is certainly more suitable for a cadaver according to traditional (European) cultural agreement. It is, of course, a question whether someone lying during a session is not more humorous than someone sitting, which is accepted as the normal position in such situations? Only in the case, of course, if it (he) is to be considered *someone*, i.e. a *person*.

At first sight, the main difference between the two cases is that whereas in the Bentham case, the body is present as a *person,* in the Mikszáth story, paradoxically the dead body is more like a *non-person*, since he cannot vote, whereas Bentham can, i.e. he (Bentham) could vote if he wanted.

The substitutability of the dead judge in the Mikszáth novel is highly controversial: how can anyone chair the session instead of him? If someone does not exist, he definitely cannot be substituted no matter how important a function he used to have when he was alive. Mikszáth seeks the solution in the presence and/or lack of the soul, a motif absolutely missing from the Bentham case that carries legal (and to some extent psychological) essences, but is totally void of spiritual meanings, at least on its surface. The question of what it actually is that the body lacks in terms of voting (if not the soul as in Mikszáth) remains excitingly unanswered in the Bentham case. Moreover, if the judge in the novel is present, whereas his body is not, what exactly is it that should be substituted? His soul? What is then the function of the cadaver at the session?

It is a question whether the solution of the Mikszáth novel is something more or something less than what is raised by the Bentham mummy.

Besides the issues comparable in the relationship between the Self and the corpse, almost everything else makes the two cases incomparable: Bentham is a mummy sitting on a chair in a box with or without his own original frightening head between his two legs in slightly different positions in the several available photos, (leaving us uninformed, for example, about his present position). Meanwhile the judge's dead body is artificially taken from the text of a novel, violating the work of art by using it in an unusual context outside the realms of literary criticism, perhaps in an inter-contextual rather than an interdisciplinary manner.

Excluding the otherwise interesting aspects of the Hungarian movie based on the novel (Zsurzs 1971), it is to be underlined that whereas Mikszáth's novel is a piece of literature, the Bentham case is a legend with a figure/object to be determined with all the aspects of an object. It still "exists," it is possible to visit it in the South Cloisters, and according to the images available in books and on the internet, "he" is played with, sometimes he is even seated next to a table. Of course, these aspects raise the question (at least in the traditional sense) that to what extent it is then an object if its position can be and is often being changed. Can the Bentham mummy be conceived as an illustration of the legend re-shaping and re-interpreting the original story in a new contextual situation every time it is moved into another position or place? Probably not, because the relation between the original legend and the mummy seems to operate the other way round: the presence of the figure may have become stronger than the story it is related to. On the one hand, we can say the story has not ended yet and may acquire endless possible continuations in the future. Or, on the other hand, the

figure has gained a special and characteristic individual life as a result of the series of happenings: its mode of existence is by far not constant. To make it more complicated, even the Internet-based mode of existence should be taken into the circle of interpretations as an approach especially sensitive to such morbid and humorous phenomena young people call "flash."

With his brilliant multidimensional intellectual joke, Bentham touched several basic questions concerning the nature of the body, the ego, the object, and, last but not least, the work of art and its author. The name, *auto-icon*, he gave to his mummy-to-be (or to himself?) places the phenomenon into the context of art as well since the term means an image of itself or a self-image.

It is not only the extension of the *self* onto the deceased body the problem to be analysed a'propos his figure, but also the extent to which the *auto-icon* is his production in terms of authorship. In case we approach his mummified body as if it were a work of art mainly because he himself determined it as an icon, the intentionalist interpretation leads the line of analysis up to the historical type of concept (Baxandall 1985) questioning whether it is possible to consider an object a work of art if the topic, the iconography, the material and the form are all the same (i.e. the dead body) and, in turn, all these determinatives are the person himself (itself), more precisely, the material framework of the deceased person. As a result of a conclusion, it can be stated almost mathematically, that behind the authorship of the *auto-icon* the original question is hidden: i.e whether the mummified body (and in broader terms all deceased forms of bodies from ashes, rotting bodies, skeletons and mummies) carry the semantic layers of the *self* or not.

The question then is not only a legal issue, and does not only touch issues of piety and dignity, but also raises questions regarding art: if the *auto-icon* is a piece of art, who is the author? If the author is Bentham, along what factors can he as an author in the traditional sense be defined if his body seems to be present in such an unusual way? Can we determine Bentham as an author in terms of his own mummified body in case we accept the person's possible extension onto his dead body? If the dead body, i.e. the mummy, is a person, he can equally be the author supposing the author normally is a person. But if the author of the auto-icon WAS Bentham to the extent that the mummy was his idea (proved in his testament), and this personhood is no longer present in the figure, can the *auto-icon* be defined as a mere work of art?

The image of the person seems to move in-and-out from the mummified body, each time questioning the problem of the authorship as well.

But if the mummy is a work of art, and if it is the deceased body of the *person/ author* itself, can we say it is more of a *copy,* more precisely even a *forgery* of the original – if we assume the original is the living body of the same *person*?

What has happened to the original that resulted in the loss of the creative essence? Was it copied? No, it died. And via death, still, yes, it was copied, because the shapes of the living being were artificially (but, as we could see, badly) preserved.

In this way aspects of *personality* and *authorship* seem to cover or cross each other.

The Resurrection of the Body

A body mummified against time and decay touches the theological problem of the future of the deceased and normally buried body in the line of the Salvation.

It is the late Medieval Ages when the physical horror of death widely appears in literary and visual representations of the *memento mori* concept in Europe. The phenomenon was first elaborated exhaustively in Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages.* (Huizinga, 2010) Although the realistic description of death and the dead body is characteristically late medieval, bodily aspects had always been represented in the iconography of resurrection much before the 14th century.

The question whether the body is to be resurrected or not has always been a most acute theological question.

In a 13th-century illustration of the Book of Revelation (MS Douce 180, Bodleian Library, Oxford, 86) some people are being resurrected in almost baby-form bodies, while others are still lying in their coffins. The image visualizes the sensitive problem of how and in what sequence and rhythm the dead are to be resurrected. If in body, in which body? In which age? In health or ruined by illness and plague? In original beauty or in original ugliness? As the locus of pain and suffering or that of pleasure and desire?

> "But someone may ask: 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?'" (1 Cor. 15:35)

In the Byzantine type iconography, the 11th-century mosaic of the Torcello cathedral, resurrection shows those ready for redemption in full form bodies whereas

the damned are represented fragmented in pieces of body. Theologically, fragmentation has been associated with sin and evil. (Finucane 1982, 197)

From the 15th century, the iconography of the *cannibal butcher shop* with cut up pieces of the human body especially widely spread in travel books and cosmographies (but already present on the Hereford mappa mundi in the 13th century) has been burdened with associations of the sinful mode of existence. (Obereskeye, 2005) The ultimate horror of cannibalism locates the "other" into a mode of existence excluded from and to be interpreted outside the opportunities of Salvation in terms of the East-West encounter, a topic not to be explored here. (see Padgen 1998, 51 and Pagels 1998, 149)

Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* (Vatican, Sixtus Chapel) was criticized by the last session of the Counter-Reformation Council of Trent (1545–64) because of the various states of the people while being raised on the basis of *ut pictura poesis* and decency.

The theory of *ut pictura poesis* (Horatius, Ars Poetica, *Epistulae* V. 361., see Lee 1940; Szőnyi 2002, 13; Radnóti 1995, 205) used for Christian thought was an adequate basis for criticism: the process of raising – it was claimed – may not be represented in different states because, according to the Scripture, the dead are to be generally resurrected at the same time. (Blunt 1978, 94) The idea of decency concluded into the "dressing up" of the bodies. Pope Paul IV wanted to annihilate the fresco, but, in the end, as it is well known, he ordered Daniele da Volterra to paint draperies on some of the bodies. Pius IV and Coloman XIII continued the project, and, according to rumours, even Pius IX wished complete it in 1936. (Blunt 1978, 87–100)

Bodily resurrection is a key issue from the aspect of our topic. Bynum claims that *identity* and *personhood* in Christianity used to be much more associated with the body than with the soul: the medieval understanding of *self*, which she calls psychosomatic, is to be understood in terms of personhood: "to make the body essential to survival and to person, it was necessary to redeem not only the difference of particularity but also the difference of nonbeing." (Bynum 1995, viii)

Bynum claims that Christian Escathology is not basically dualistic in the way it has been traditionally treated, or in the way Gnosticism and Manicheism are. (Bynum 1987) Moreover, she says, the medieval concept of the *body* takes us much closer to the understanding of the *self* than the analysing the concept of the *soul* or *psyche*.

The medieval concept of personality (*per se una*) meaning one and indivisible (united) (Gurjewitsch 1994, 107) should be, Bynum claims, interpreted in terms of not a body separated from the soul but as an entity to be determined by physical capacities and perception. (Bynum 1995)

The emphasis on the body in Bynum's studies can be, to a large extent, paralleled with Peter Brown's explanation of the relic to be elaborated later.

The role of the body and its connection to the individual character of the human being could most acutely be grasped in the time relations of the Last Judgement vs individual death: Gurjewitsch claims that the significance of personhood delicately becomes represented in the intersection of individual life and history. (Gurjewitsch 1994, 121) The controversial nature of the two judgements (one at the end of the individual life, and the other at Jesus' Second Coming) has always been a cardinal theological issue. According to Ariès' interpretation, individual life in the medieval times could only be balanced at the moment of the Doomsday, and there is an indefinable gap between the individual death and the Dies Irae. He claims that there existed neither a concept of a complete *self* in a certain period of the Middle Ages, nor a concept of the Doomsday until the 12th–13th centuries. Although Gurjewitsch rightly criticizes Ariès for this ignorance (Gurjewitsch 1994,118; see Last Judgement representations on tympanums of 11th-century Romanesque churches like Autun, Vezelay, Moissac, etc), they both agree that the framework of *identity* and *personhood* could be grasped in the concept and moment of death. (Gurjewitsch 1994, 119)

The Resurrection of Lazarus

The eschatological question of the possible bodily resurrection parallels with the possibility of the resurrection of the body in the Bible.

An early 12th-century description tells about the resurrections of Adam, Lazarus and Matthew's saints under Jesus' crucifix ("The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people." [Mt 27:52–53] (MS Lat.qu.198, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz, fol 320v) Adam's tomb (bones, skull or skeleton) is a traditional element of the iconography of crucifixion to be interpreted typologically in terms of the original sin-and-salvation system. Although both

Matthew's saints and Lazarus are unusual on crucifixion scenes, Lazarus' raising and the Last Judgement resurrection are brought into strong relationship from an evidently very physical-bodily aspect.

The text "Jesus Raises Lazarus From the Dead" (Jn 11:1–46:4) is one of the most excitingly puzzling sections in the New Testament:

> "Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 'Take away this stone,' he said. 'But Lord,' said Martha, the sister of the dead man, 'by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there for four days.'"

Martha's sentence is a presumption based on general experience, but after Lazarus appears, it remains unanswered whether the body was in the state of decay or not, whether it had any smell:

> "Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you, that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So, they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.' When he said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.'"

There is an element in the iconography of the raising of Lazarus coming from the uncertainty of the written solution: on Giotto's fresco in the Arena Chapel, Padua (1301), or for example on Albert van Ouwater's painting (1455, Berliner Staatliche Museen, Gemälde Galerie) a figure covering his nose is represented referring to the smell of the corpse.

Whether the dead body had already been possessed by decay before it was raised is an exciting theological question. In this paper the approach has to be narrowed down to the point whether and how the living *self* is to be localized in terms of the deceased body. Was a decomposing corpse brought back into the state adequate for a living being, or it had not even started to decay? More concretely: among what physical circumstances could Lazarus' *self* gain a material nature?

Time between two corporeal deaths. Integrity and fragmentation

In Faulkner's "The Tall Men" (1941) in an event that could be called a ritual, and in a room that turns into a space of initiation a leg is being amputated and buried into the given person's own future grave: "*He moved quickly, easily... he had lifted the bundle into a narrow trench and was covering it, covering as rapidly as he had dug, smoothing the earth over it with a shovel*". In Maupassant's short story, "On the Sea" (1883), a fisherman's arm cut by a rope is buried in the same way into his future grave.

Through the idea of a limb separated from our body and buried in a grave, starting to decay independently from us both in time and space, the questions of the extension and the location of the *self* are treated in a horrifying scope. To experience and to survive our own death creates a morbid perspective concerning the meaning of a body emptied but not void of its essence. To witness one's own deduced death and to become corpse and mourning family member in relation to the very same body creates an own-corpse relic together with its place of worship, puts the perversely exact question: are we present in our body(part) outside of our body as *pars pro toto*?

The decaying body stops time in a weird form: that part of us will not continue aging, at least not in terms of the living physical entity, but it will fall victim to ruinous time in another way by falling prey to decay. The two times – that of aging and that of decay – are paralleled in a peculiar competition inside and outside the grave, and become simultaneous in terms of the same body.

The morbid situations in Maupassant and Faulkner create a special concept of time: the living person is determined by an uncertain span of time between two deaths questioning the localization of the *person* as such both in time and space.

The integrity of the bodies in the two short stories is ultimately broken, and the frustrating fragmentation in both "examples" figures the question of how and where the *self* is to be localized. Fragmentation, an "existence in several pieces," is burdened with meanings of *sin* in Christian tradition, as demonstrated above. In the two short stories, the concept of *memento mori* is turned morbid in the forms of "own-body-relics."

The empty grave

Body parts buried into the future grave that "activate" the place of worship by giving it an independent mode of living, may be paralleled with Anderson's arresting image of the "tomb of the unknown soldier" intentionally empty or simply unidentifiable. (Anderson 1991, 23) Anderson treats the phenomenon as a par excellence manifestation of the national idea as such, and compares the image – mistakenly though – with the ancient kenotaphium referring to byzantinologist J. Herrin's oral comment who claims that if the cadaver was not available, a pseudo-tomb was constructed. (Anderson 1991, 23)

The truth is that kenotaphium is a phenomenon already known in the Egyptian Old Kingdom: it seems that a section of Djoser's pyramid district was devoted to this function. Moreover, one of Snofru's mysterious Dahsur and Saqqara pyramids must have incorporated the same meaning. (Kákosy 1979, Dobrovits 1979) Although the original function of the kenotaphium has not fully been explained in Egyptology, it seems that these buildings were not erected instead of the real tombs but together with them as duplicates; they possibly mutually explain and complete rather than substitute each other.

Could the empty graves burdened with Anderson's analyses and the ones in Faulkner and Maupassant's short stories be examined along the same line of explanation? Are the two graves – i.e the contents attributed to the empty grave and the future grave "activated" by deceased body parts buried into it – places of worship in different ways? Are they both "*lieux de mémoire*" in the sense Pierre Nora introduces the term?

Anderson's empty grave and the *kenotaphium* may be interpreted as a memory place for absent corpses. But where can graves that contain body parts – without which people still went on living their lives – be placed on a scale ranging from empty graves to traditional ones filled with complete corpses? Buried body parts actually create a place of worship neither empty nor "full."

Can we say that the decaying, buried body parts themselves have become memory places, *lieux de mémoire,* just like Bentham's auto-icon?

Graves or tombs are memory places of the dead: but are not corpses themselves memory places of those deceased humans? This question becomes especially acute if the corpse is to be interpreted outside the context of the grave like Bentham's *auto*-icon, or relics of the saints, or mummies of any culture from Ra-

messes II to Lenin or if, the other way round, corpses not complete or truncated get into the space of the grave.

Connections of past and present manifested in relation to decay are primarily evident in the concept of *piety*.

If the dead body may be a memory place and a material embodiment of the person, what does piety mean?

Piety

The interpretation of piety in law is one of the most problematic fields, and it greatly varies depending on different legal systems both in a synchronic and a diachronic approach.

Rights related to the tomb or grave of the deceased person usually seem to overlap with the personal rights of the living person, and are mostly connected to *respect* and *reputation.* (Lenkovics–Székely 2000, 121) Respect and reputation may be conceived as ideas circumscribing the concept of memory.

The dead body, although it is not a person in legal terms, obtains rights which are similar to those of a person, and are most evident in connection to the grave, meaning that any right can most easily be linked to the physical remains of the deceased person.

If the deceased person legally can best be related to his grave on the one hand and to his own memory on the other, perhaps it is acceptable to suppose that the dead body (in any form, or its remains) can itself be considered a *lieu de memoire* in cultural terms and in the way Pierre Nora introduced it (Nora 1992) because it does not exist, although it does, or, the other way round, it exists even if it does not.

His deceased personality-personhood, connected to material shape through unusual forms of his remembrance – as seen above –, seems frustratingly and evidently present.

The *auto-icon* can be regarded as the inverse of burying the leg and arm in the two short stories mentioned above: the burial of the body fragments put *life,* whereas Bentham's mummy present at the College Council put *death* into quotation marks.

It is to be underlined here that Bentham's corpse does not acquire meaning only because of its presence in mummy-form, but also as a result of his right to vote.

Mummies in Western cultural tradition (like the right foot of St Catherine in the sacral space of Giovanni e Paolo, Venice; Egyptian mummies in non-sacral spaces of any museum; or Lenin's mummy in the politically sacralized space of the mausoleum newly opened in May 2013) raise all kinds of questions but definitely not whether the dead body is a person or not.

Relics

The respect for exposed decaying bodies in the Western Christian tradition, a religion basically denying matter and body, is one of the cardinal issues in the study of relic cults. Traditionally the cult of the saints has been explained as hidden polytheism. According to this theory the veneration of saints is a popularized version of abstract dogmas too difficult to understand for everyday people. Hulme claims that the elegant theology of the early Christian period became corrupted by the introduction of a popular mythology which restored polytheism. (Hume 1875, 335; Gibbon 1909, 225)

Peter Brown's strikingly novel interpretation gave a new direction to the study of the cult of the saints and relics. He says the worship of the saints is an immanent essence of Christianity: miraculous elements in the saints' lives, and miracles occurring again and again at their graves made the places containing their body parts privileged places where the two controversial points, Heaven and Earth could meet. (Brown 1980, 48)

The miracles of the saints are organic continuations of Jesus's miracles in the Gospels. It is the miracle element Max Weber also considered the essential core of Catholicism, which was fully denied by Protestantism. (Weber 1930)

The Christian cult of the saints, Brown claims, was born in the cemeteries outside the towns of the Roman world: the Christians excavated and carried away their saints positing the body parts in places where no dead people had turned up earlier. (Brown, 102)

The particular importance of the saints' body parts is proved by the especially cruel punishment of those who stole or desecrated them, like in the case of Nicolo, Giovanni, and Domenico who tried to steal the heads of the apostles St Peter and St Paul. (Kirschbaum 1987, 200–201)

Bynum's above shown studies overlap with Brown's results in terms of *matter* and *body* in Christian thought which seems to have been much more important

than traditionally considered. As mentioned above, Ariès and Gurjewitsch claim that the notion of *personhood* was closely – and according to Bynum, was mostly – related to the concept of the *body*.

The corpse as the locus of past and present

Memory is not everywhere present, Pierre Nora claims, it only is if a *memory-person* takes on himself the tasks of remembering. Memory may reveal the past by turning and actualizing it into present: in order to feel the past, it should be detached from the present. (Nora 1992, 24)

In the cult of the saints, time is being sacralized. The celebration of saints' feast days stops time and turns past into present. (Barna 2001, Bartha 2001)

According to Nora, memory acquires its significance by separating past and present. In case of the cult of the saints, it may be interpreted in the other way round I think, as past is made continuously present for example in the case of a mummy artificially kept against time and decay, or in the case of body parts buried before the ultimate death.

Nora's idea that documents multiply the number of signs proving their own existence like a snake sheds its skin (Nora 1992, 18) may take us closer to the assumption that the corpse can also serve as a sign of the deceased person in relation to his "shed" body.

Nora's snake skin metaphor may be paralleled with Ricoeur's concept of memory as a trace left behind similarly to what animals leave behind, making them a public object. (Ricoeur 1999, 57) Such traces – he says – turn into a public object.

Summarizing questions

The chain of arguments then takes us back to our original question whether the corpse is an *object*, or to what extent can or does the concept of the *person* expand to it.

A body appearing in the form of a corpse seems to demonstrate complicated interrelations of cultural, legal and psychological aspects impossible to reveal.

In the sentence "present but not voting" not only personhood (approached from the aspect of voting right) is to be examined, but also the expression "present," a meaning only partially touched above.

The problem of personhood could as well be analyzed through the aspect of the *praesentia* of the corpse, and this approach would consider its space-filling nature and function, the visual semantic aspects, its time relations and above all the references to passing time and the signifying capacities operating in terms of time from another angle.

Supposing the corpse is an object, and assuming that the above-mentioned manifestations are to be regarded as *lieux de mémoire,* why should not it also be considered a work of art? With this approach, the whole realm of meaning, authorship, and value, etc. of the work of art are touched even in terms of *kitsch*.

Bentham's *auto-icon* is definitely an offending object the way Mitchell means it: "Offending images are radically unstable entities whose capacity to harm depends on complex social context. Those contexts can change, sometimes as result of the public debate around the image, more often because the initial shock wanes, to be replaced by familiarity or even affection." (Mitchell 2005, 131) Furthermore, Bentham's *auto-icon* offends both the figure itself in terms of piety and the viewer who is hurt in most of his culturally determined preoccupations concerning the concept of death and the place of the dead: *"Some offend because they degrade something valuable or desecrate..." "Some offend because of the manner of representation..."* (Mitchell 2005, 131)

The *auto-icon* has undeniably gained a special independent life of its own: it is being exhibited, it is stored and restored, the unsuccessfully mummified head is placed in between the two legs (sic!), it is regularly moved as a result of which the position of the legs and the whole body changes. It is not evident which of the many variations is the real one, and whether it meets the expectations of the object as such.

The most difficult question, which is impossible to elaborate here, is definitely the character of the offending nature. Although it "has to do with the strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of 'liminality'" as in a definition of the "uncanny" (Royle 2003), and it is "targeting the borderlines of cultural imagination" as the fantastic appears to operate (Kiss– Szőnyi 2002, 22), Bentham's mummy – if it is (or even if it is not) regarded as a work of art – is perhaps neither fantastic, nor to be interpreted in the realm of uncanny. Moreover, it seems to cause the problems because of its essences so close to realism. Its disturbing nature may be due to its extreme realism: actually, it is more real than acceptable or bearable.

Could the term *morbid* be used? Although dictionaries explain the term with "an unusual interest in death," besides its medical meaning the description of the

term might be further widened by the introduction of the element of *realism* with a definite overtone of the extreme.

The head put in between the two legs provides a huge range of further associations: on the so-called Narmer-palette (3000 BC, Cairo Museum) the beheaded corpses of the defeated enemy are demonstrated with their heads put between the legs, but the image could even be approached within the scope of gender studies with its visual references to childbirth or sexuality. It may contain elements of humiliation and desecration, and, last, but not least, the idea of the changed, or "transposed heads" (Thomas Mann) ultimately raises the problem of "who is the person without his own head?"

Whether humiliation or desecration have any meaning in the semantic realm of the morbid remains a question.

Of course, the Bentham phenomenon cannot be compared to the Mikszáth story since the latter is a literary piece of art (if we exclude now the aspects the movie based on the novel may bring into the scope), whereas the Bentham *auto-icon* is both an object and a story attached to it without "values added" by literature. The figure survives with a continuous visual impact to be re-interpreted in connection to the original story as many times as possible. Furthermore, as it was mentioned above, its position is regularly moved providing a strange nature of existence.

All in all, according to the meaning of the term, the *auto-icon* is an image of itself, where the image is the self-picture of its own theme.

The topic of the work of art is itself, a mimesis turning back into itself in terms of the Western classical theoretical heritage not to be examined here. (Auerbach 2003)

Excluding now all the religious projections of the theme such as God as a creator, we can raise the issue of intentionality supposing the authorship is to be grasped in the will (testament) or in the idea or in the intention (Baxandall 1985) of the author (Bentham) who created a self-body piece of art, or memorial, or *lieu de mémoire*. The corpse is the material, the form, and the topic of the work of art extremely difficult to interpret in the system of iconology.

Besides all this, we may even claim that the *auto-icon* is not only a copy or imitation, but is also a forgery if the living person in the framework of life is the original. (Radnóti 1995)

Which means it is an object. Or is it rather a person?

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