

Waxing into Words: Virginia Woolf and the Funeral Effigies at Westminster Abbey

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The character of Doris Kilman in *Mrs. Dalloway* suffers from bad press, yet she occupies a place that is always treated with respect in Woolf's work: for like Rosamond Merridew in "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn", Miss Kilman is both historian and history teacher. A historian was what the young Virginia Stephen herself thought she could be, and at the time of Leslie Stephen's death in 1904 it was what he expected that she would become, having himself directed her intensive early reading of Macaulay and Carlyle. Surrounded by her family network of historians—for in addition to her father, F.W. Maitland and Herbert Fisher were also established historians—Woolf herself tried history teaching from 1905 to 1907 at Morley College, the evening educational institute on London's South Bank. At the end of her first term she wrote a report, explaining that "I tried to make the real interest of history—as it appears to me—visible to them" (i.e. her students), in hopes that they would "feel the flesh & blood in these shadows" (Bell 1: 203). Woolf strives to make her subject interesting, as any good teacher should, but the interest is also strongly embodied: it is primarily a matter of seeing and feeling, of something made material and incarnate. For Woolf, the place where history comes alive is Westminster Abbey. It is in the Abbey's shadows that she perceives those figures of flesh and blood, and Miss Kilman does too, for even as she struggles to pray, she is distracted by "the variously assorted worshippers . . . middle-class, English men and women, some of them desirous of seeing the wax works" (*MD* 146). Instead of praying, Miss Kilman is really thinking about the funeral effigies on display in Westminster Abbey.

Virginia Woolf was herself one of those people "desirous of seeing the waxworks", ambulating in the background as Miss Kilman tries to concentrate on prayer. In June 1905 she reported to Violet Dickinson that:

Yesterday I did a very melancholy thing—which was to take my working women over the Abbey. Only one came!—and we solemnly went round the Chapel and the waxworks together, and saw the mummy of a 40 year old parrot—which makes history *so* interesting miss! (*L1*: 192)

In effect, Woolf is describing a class trip to see the funeral figures at Westminster Abbey. The collection dates from 1377, and can be organized into three groups: royal funeral effigies from Edward III to James I, made of wood and plaster, lacking almost all clothing, and sometimes known

as the “ragged regiment”; wax models made after 1660, but still for funerary purposes, many with original clothes in good condition; and wax figures made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries solely as exhibition pieces. Whatever their age and condition, all had been made to be as lifelike as possible, dressed in the actual clothes of the deceased. The history of the effigies was haphazard, as they formed no intended collection and were not preserved with any particular care. Since the rise of tourism in the seventeenth century they had become curiosities. When Woolf visited in 1905 the effigies were still an eccentric gathering stuffed into a corner of the Abbey, but were beginning to attract the attention of the Society of Antiquaries. At its instigation photographic records were made in that same year, thus affording accurate images of what Woolf would have seen, which led in 1908 to the creation of a museum in the Undercroft for the earliest medieval figures, with the later waxworks relegated to the Upper Isip Chapel.¹ It is this chapel that is the location for Woolf’s essay “Waxworks at the Abbey”.

Woolf writes from personal experience, therefore, and the waxworks make multiple cameo appearances in her work. The figure of Queen Elizabeth appears in the essay “Reading”, in which Woolf wonders “Whether some tinted wax-work is the foundation of my view” (E3:145-6); and we encounter it again in *Orlando*, where the Queen is “a lady whose eyes were always, if the waxworks at the Abbey are to be trusted, wide open” (22). Indeed, it is not the human figures alone which attract Woolf’s attention. The Duchess of Richmond’s stuffed parrot—an African Grey—which figures in both Woolf’s 1905 letter and “Waxworks” essay, may well be the original for the feisty bird in Woolf’s story, “The Widow and the Parrot”: here, a “large grey parrot” whose “feathers were sadly neglected”—as well they might be after being on display for over two hundred years (Woolf 1985: 157). If Woolf feels it worth telling Violet Dickinson that after forty years of companionship the Duchess’s parrot died soon after its owner, then her story’s parrot does likewise. Its melodramatic demise may be entirely typical of Woolf’s tongue-in-cheek Charleston satires, but there is nevertheless something of the stuffed bird’s perkiness in the picture of the parrot that Woolf doodled at the head of her typescript. This is not Flaubert’s polychrome Loulou: it is a practical and sober bird, true friend to both duchesses and widows.

¹ Much of what Woolf saw was either destroyed by bombs on 10-11 May 1941, or badly damaged by the water used to extinguish the fires. As she had died a little over a month previously, she was never to know of the loss. Therefore, the pre-WWII photographs of 1905-07 and again of 1933-36, when the effigies were cleaned and restored under supervision of the Victoria and Albert Museum, provide an invaluable record of the effigies as Woolf would have seen them in her lifetime. Today eighteen effigies survive at the Abbey, heavily restored in the 1980s and displayed as a permanent collection in the Undercroft Museum.

Although conceived as a children's story, "The Widow and the Parrot" makes a serious point. With its subtitle, "A True Story", and many references to actual people and places (such as Leonard Woolf, and the Monk's House kitchen), the narrative blurs the line between reality and fiction. This same line is violated by the Abbey waxworks, which have always had a disturbing effect, as a visitor who saw them in 1734 testifies:

I think they are ridiculous and unnatural in themselves, expressing neither figure like statuary, nor colour like painting: secondly, I am humbly of opinion that they would become a puppet-shew better than a church, as making a mere farce of what should be great and solemn; and, thirdly, I think them highly injurious to the characters they represent, as shewing them like jointed babies, to the stupid admiration of the vulgar, and the contempt of men of sense; instead of characterising their persons, and perpetuating their virtues. (Ralph 85)

This critic makes a number of useful objections. He is offended by the figures because they fall into no discrete aesthetic genre. They are also subversive, in the sense that they do not present history in a serious or dignified manner: important historical figures like English monarchs are made to look too ordinary, even ridiculous. Then again, they are inappropriately displayed: such spectacle has no place in Westminster Abbey, and they attract the wrong kind of person (Doris Kilman would agree)—one who comes to be merely entertained, rather than to worship God. In all of these criticisms the viewer reveals how much he feels under threat. The effigies destabilise his safely defined world: a world where things know their place in terms of style, history, spectatorship, location, and even class; a world where there is a reassuring border between the sacred and the profane. Little wonder that the poor man finds these effigies "unnatural", for his is not a misguided reaction, but one which is properly frightened by the uncanny, in the sense that Elizabeth Wright observes: "It is precisely when our complacent identities are challenged by the unexpected that the uncanny is experienced: the most familiar and therefore the most reassuring is transformed into the strange" (4).

It is for this reason that the Abbey waxworks offer a way of understanding a response to realistic images that is behavioural, psychological, and even irrational, rather than critical. And this is a significant point, because before she had yet to embark on any kind of sustained fiction writing, experimental or otherwise, Woolf's involvement with history laid the foundations of a practice that would inform the narrative strategies of her fiction in decades to come. We are all familiar with the Woolf who objects to material detail, and seems to have conclusively established that the more we concentrate on Mrs. Brown's cheap three-and-ten-three brooch from Whitworth's bazaar, the more

her character will escape us (*E3*: 428). And yet, the figure of Queen Elizabeth is constructed of little else:

She was splendidly made up. Her head, pearl-hung, rose from the vast ruff. Shiny satins draped her. Sixpenny brooches glared like cats' eyes and tigers' eyes; pearls looked down; her cape was made out of cloth of silver—in fact swabs used to scour saucepans. (*BTA* 52)

We recognise this, of course, as Eliza Clark the shopkeeper, fancy-dressed as Queen Elizabeth in *Between the Acts*. But this is also the waxwork Queen, as Woolf encountered her in the Upper Islip Chapel. It had been repaired numerous times over the centuries, and suffered as a result. The original wooden funeral effigy, together with its complete sets of genuine coronation and Parliament robes, had badly deteriorated and lost most of its clothes by the beginning of the 1700s. In 1760 a wax replacement was ordered, considered at the time to have been a faithful replica of the portrait original. At the same time the figure was furnished with new clothes which were modelled upon mid-eighteenth-century ideas of Elizabethan dress, together with fake pearls and paste jewels of the same period. In the next century the Queen acquired a net collar from a Victorian theatrical costumier, resulting in an overall impression of pastiche that was not lost upon the *Times* when the figure was returned to display after its restoration in 1934: “the rather tawdry Royal robes and other garments are covered with a profusion of coloured glass pastes and imitation pearls in the best eighteenth century Wardour Street manner” (15).

The *Times* was not entirely wrong: to this day these wax effigies would seem more at home in Madame Tussaud's museum than an important national collection. Why was Woolf drawn to them? It is her irrational rather than critical response that invites our speculation. None of the figures were ever intended as works of art, for in the funeral procession they were meant to be taken for the person of the deceased him or herself. As such they function in the same way as, for example, words in the “sign-language” of Lagado in *Gulliver's Travels*, whereby people simply hold up the object that is being referred to: signifier and signified are the same thing. It is, in fact, the Duchess of Richmond's stuffed parrot which manages this perfectly, at once both actual bird and effigy of itself. With wax this effect of “*what-goes-without-saying*”, as Barthes puts it, is heightened further still, which mimics the bloom of human skin to an extraordinarily convincing degree. Wax has those same qualities which Barthes observes of plastic: a “miraculous substance” which in itself signifies nothing, but for the things that it seeks to imitate: flowers, anatomical models, Chinese food, human

beings (*M* 97-9). This quality is what allows Woolf to respond to the wax effigy of Charles II in a manner which renders his base materiality invisible (ill. 1):

King Charles still seems quivering with the passions and the greeds of life. The great lips are still pouting and watering and asking for more. The eyes are pouched and creased with all the long nights they have watched out—the torches, the dancing, and the women. In his dirty feathers and lace he is the very symbol of voluptuousness and dissipation, and his great blue-veined nose seems an irreverence on the part of the modeller, as if to set the crowd, as the procession comes by, nudging each other in the ribs and telling merry stories of the monarch. (*E4*: 541-2)

Here, even as Woolf draws attention to the modeller's craft, the effect of extreme realism (the blue-veined nose) works to suppress awareness of the effigy as made object, and instead sets the spectators sniggering and gossiping over human foibles. In overlooking the conditions of its own art the wax effigy promotes identification with itself, such that it strikes Woolf at a level that is directly corporeal: it is the senses of gluttony and lust that appeal to her, and not the medium itself. For as much as she refers to the "modeller", she does not write about the skill of the artist, or draw attention to the conventions of genre or style which would interfere with the illusion. In this sense, the model does not give anything of itself away. Ideally, with the exception of changing fashions in dress, the wax figure of Charles II must have the same visual impact as the twentieth-century polyester resin and fibreglass figures of a hyperrealist artist like Duane Hanson. But while artworks such as Hanson's 1970 *Tourists* ask postmodern questions about the limits of representation, such questions are posed by funeral effigies. In the past, since they possessed no stylistic signature or period flavour attributable to a particular artist or school, realistic wax figures were regarded as second-rate art, and were primarily modelled by women, of whom Madame Tussaud is herself the best example. There is therefore an implicit gendered response at play, as revealed for example by Roger Fry when he lets drop that the moribund realism of the artist David has a "highly polished 'Mme. Tussaud' surface" (*VD* 8). The mere copying of reality is always already inferior: "Some of us," he boasts, "can tell Canadian cheddar at a glance" (*VD* 47), and confirms his expertise by observing that "if imitation is the sole purpose of the graphic arts, it is surprising that the works of such arts are ever looked upon as more than curiosities, or ingenious toys, are ever taken seriously by grown-up people" (like himself, presumably; *VD* 17). Women, colonials, and children are interchangeable in Fry's aesthetic, which assimilates the age-old assumption that the more *accurate* the imitation, the less "serious" it is as art.

Woolf's encounter with waxworks is on an entirely different footing: visual accuracy does not faze this intrepid modernist. On the contrary, the blue-veined nose of Charles II fascinates her, and she stands mesmerised in front of Elizabeth (ill. 2):

The Queen dominates the room as she once dominated England. Leaning a little forward so that she seems to beckon you to come to her . . . Her eyes are wide and vigilant; her nose thin as the beak of a hawk; her lips shut tight; her eyebrows arched; only the jowl gives the fine drawn face its massiveness. . . . She will not allow one to look elsewhere. (E4 540-1)

David Freedberg's suggestion in *The Power of Images*, that "we are more than expectedly disturbed" when statues have eyes painted in (220), may explain the impression it makes on Woolf. Even the *Times* report on the 1934 restoration of the Queen's waxwork acknowledges that "few can readily forget the pale, ghastly face and staring eyes of this figure" (15). Freedberg proposes that our unease is partly produced by the conflict between the rational awareness of the inertia of the aesthetic medium—in this case, wax—and the irrational but irrepressible sense that this material is nevertheless alive. It could be Woolf herself, standing transfixed by the waxwork Queen, whom Freedberg has in mind with his observation that "we are arrested by these images at least partly out of fear that they might just come alive, just open their mouths, just begin to move" (231). Woolf's waxwork Queen is undeniably threatening, and in her description is certainly already more than half alive. It is not a comfortable notion to imagine ourselves in the Islip chapel, alone with her or any other of her waxwork companions. They are, after all, the Dead: inert figures fashioned in the image of what was once alive, their cultural significance lying in the rituals of mourning and burial. Their very qualities of being uncannily lifelike are precisely those which provoke fear, which Freud analyses in terms of the horror of Death in his 1919 *Totem and Taboo*. Freud discusses the human tendency to attribute life to inanimate objects as an expression of taboo surrounding the corpse. He draws his examples from contemporary anthropological accounts of so-called "primitive races" from Polynesia to Africa, but Woolf finds those same irrational impulses played out in the heart of London itself, in no less a place than Westminster Abbey.

Woolf's many responses to the funeral effigies are therefore always ambivalent. Both the wax and the wooden effigies have the power to disturb. In many ways the "ragged regiment" arouses even more fear than the waxworks, for these are truly uncanny in the sense that Wright intends. Here the illusion of life is gone, and what we see instead are bodies subjected to violence and decay. Bald heads are drilled with peg-holes for the fixings of crowns and wigs; torsos have burst open, losing

their straw packing; leather skin is crudely nailed into place; wooden poles are roughly shoved up insides, to lend stability and strength. There, confronting us from her 1907 photograph as Woolf would have seen her, is Elizabeth of York: a woman of much grace and considerable fame (ill. 3). Some of that may be deduced from the poise of her one arm, and the elegance that remains of her physique: the effigy stands at a life-size 5 feet 11½ inches tall. But she is also vulnerable and abject, her legs and body exposed, denied all modesty; *merely* body. Literally taboo, in the sense that Freud explains, she is “everything that is sacred, above the ordinary, and at the same time dangerous, unclean and mysterious” (*TT* 37). If the realism of waxworks makes us “confront our fear of the lifelike”, as David Freedberg observes (221), then these battered wooden remains make us confront our fear of death. Both of these responses were available to Woolf in her visits to the effigies at the Abbey. It is not surprising that she kept returning to them throughout her life, for they stand at the crossroads of her craft, and confuse the distinctions between not just history and narrative, but also between the material and the crystalline. What the effigies showed her, was that she did not have to choose her path: they pointed in both directions at once.

Illustration 1

Effigy of Charles II, 1686 (made after the funeral, to stand over the royal tomb). Wax, life size (6' 2"), dressed in Charles's own Garter robes. Photographed in 1934. Reproduced in Harvey and Mortimer, *The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey*, 81.



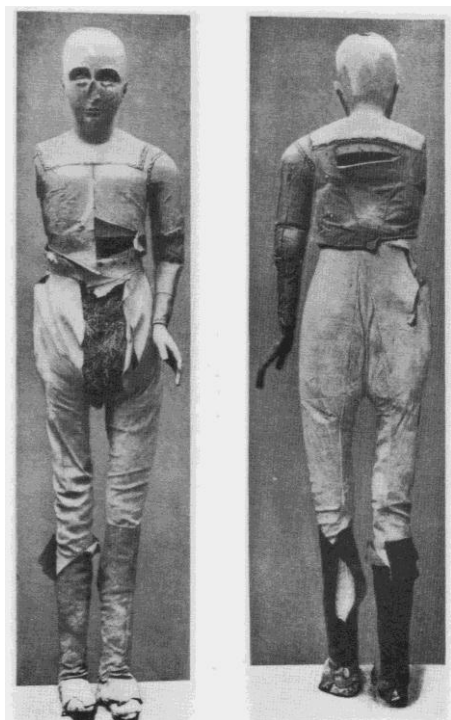
Illustration 2

Wax effigy of Queen Elizabeth I: 1760, based on 1603 wooden original. Photographed in 1934, and published in the *Times* of 26 March, 1934, to illustrate the article on the restoration of the figure. Reproduced in Harvey and Mortimer, *The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey*, 161.



Illustration 3

Funeral effigy of Elizabeth of York, wife of Henry VII, 1503. Wood, life size (5' 11½" tall). Only the head, bust, arm and hand survive after WWII damage. Photographed in 1907. Reproduced in Harvey and Mortimer, *The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey*, 44.



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