Introduction: lyrical matter

> For love is never without its shadow of anxiety.
> We have this treasure in earthen vessels.
>
> —George Eliot[1]

As Esther is dying, in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, she grasps a locket containing her daughter's hair. She has worn it around her neck since the girl's death many years ago, and now she touches it to her lips once or twice just before she dies. A series of gestures can be traced here. The first is the cutting of the tress, possibly postmortem. Wearing the encased fragment against her body, hidden by her clothing and tucked into her "bosom," Esther doubly conceals the relic but also carries it into the public thoroughfare of her days. The dying kiss, a third gesture, regenerates links to the dead, bringing forth the specter of reunion in the afterlife. The tender action might have the opposite meaning: perhaps the kiss is an affirmation of the final parting. Although Gaskell presents a dramatic picture of such performances, what she describes was a commonplace series of rituals used to remember the dead during the Victorian period.

The dead body's materiality held a certain enchantment for Victorians, a charmed ability to originate narrative. Bodies left behind traces of themselves, shreds that could then become material for memories. Such vestiges might be found in objects the body had touched as it advanced through existence: clothing worn, letters written, utensils handled. The hands may have formed matter into a work of art, or a more ordinary possession, depositing some mark of its maker. More concretely, the body itself or its parts functioned for the Victorians as mementos: the snippet of hair made into jewelry or even a bone or desiccated organ kept in a special container. Less tangibly, the body – its presence, then absence – could be felt in spaces it had inhabited, such as rooms, houses, or spots in nature. Although these "substances" fall in disparate registers – a room and a portion of skin, for example, have widely different legal, ethical, and

religious statuses – they all share the capacity to be marked by or *to be* the physical presence of a beloved or revered individual. Central to this study is the body as a material thing that affects other material things. Corporeality, for many Victorians, lent the resonance of subjectivity to objects, laded them with leavings of the self. Part of this understanding of the body-as-thing was informed by the desire to find in and through these keepsakes an active, revivified love for that individual now dead.

Integral to the exploration of the "thingness" of the body is the influence on corporeality (and on "things" of all sorts) of Victorian death culture. The cultural forces that played a part in the various, and changing, attitudes toward death in the era range from philosophical to aesthetic to religious. Romantic individualism and sentimentalism, carried into the later nineteenth century, gave artifacts a more personal character; they leant to death-inflected mementos a quality of transmitting selfhood. The Evangelical revivals of the 1830s and 1840s, which were heavily influenced by Romanticism's focus on emotionalism, popularized the idea of the "good death," a set of beliefs that gave the corpse and its offshoots an illumination, a vitality, reflected from that shining afterlife where the individual was believed to have gone. Spiritualists, in a movement beginning in the 1850s, felt that the dead still lingered among the living and that the materiality of these spirits – and their imprint on matter, substance, and space – proved it. Even Victorian atheists, especially in the late nineteenth century, located in the mortal passage and its embodiment a conviction that our objecthood defined our selfhood at all stages of existence. Death culture therefore shaped the Victorian understanding of the body as a revered object.

The Victorian representation of the cadaver as a special type of information- and emotion-laden artifact also influenced – and was influenced by – the literary. The body and the book intersected. This sometimes happened with a palpable literalness: a lock of hair, a pinch of cremation ash, or even a mummified organ was kept between the covers of a book. A volume was bound in the skin of an individual. Yet, more commonly, this intersection happened figuratively. Personal effects could act as "repositories" for stories about the past, or for lyrical memories. Matter stood in for lived presence, for the narrative of a body. As such, these mementos are the material objects that beg to be "read" more than, arguably, any other objects. They sometimes wore their use on their very surface – like a wooden toy smoothed by handling, chipped with incident – and thus they became texts to be deciphered. Postmortem art, such as death masks, saved a moment in the chronicle of being. The literariness of

remains was often enhanced by their aestheticization. They were usually framed within jewelry or cases – sometimes inscribed – as if they were bound books or formally structured poems. From mortality and its residue sparked narrative, and thus did stories emerge from mementos, just as moving life fossilized into these final representations, these objects that had once been subjects.

Death keepsakes could be literary, but literature of the period also often featured such mementos, as subjects for poetry or as tropes in plots. Moreover, some of the texts discussed in these pages had a direct influence on Victorian death culture and its relationship to the body, such as the novels of Dickens and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Other writers subtly developed commonplace ideas about mortality and materiality found in the larger culture of the nineteenth century, such as John Keats, Emily Brontë, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Thomas Hardy, thus giving us a more complex understanding of the use of physical memorials. In the following pages novels and poetry are read as a means to understand the relic culture they elucidate, just as relics are "read" to theorize their begetting of signs, tales, and lyricism. The former method borrows from the well-established practice of material culture criticism. Elaine Freedgood has described the task of the material culturist in reading "nonsymbolic objects" in Victorian novels. Such interpretation "involves taking a novelistic thing materially or literally and then following it beyond the covers of the text through a mode of research that proceeds according to the many dictates of a strong form of metonymic reading."[2] Thing theory also tells us that poems and novels themselves can be understood as relic-like; this is part of the project of thinking about how and why relics were treated by Victorians like poems and novels.[3] Corpses, texts, stories, and poems interknit; they inform us of Victorian practices of making meaning in the face of – and *with the face of* – death.

Although the following chapters continue an exploration of what James Curl has called "the Victorian celebration of death," but with a more material inflection, they also ask what thing theory has to tell us about attitudes toward the body, and particularly the corpse, during the period. In other words, how can thing theory help us develop a better understanding of death culture in the era? Furthermore, how might the study of material culture itself be transformed when it is brought to bear on relic culture? As one of our most important proponents for theories of material culture, Bill Brown makes the case that "granting the physical world its alterity is the very basis for accepting otherness as such."[4] Granting the corpse and its oddments a place in living narrative is a means to recognize

the singularity and irreplaceability of all individuals, their incommensurable otherness. Approaching this idea from another direction, we see that such objects shift our understanding of all objects during the period. As commodities became ever more symbolic by the middle of the nineteenth century, as the object lost its quality as the "thing itself" and became increasingly mediated by its role as a market "good," the death memento held onto its immediacy. Corporeal keepsakes, having no "use value," kept the thing as thing enchanted. A lively memento culture respects the object's magic.

Although this book is about nineteenth-century British death culture, Chapter 1 begins an argument that weaves through all the chapters: the materiality of this culture has a steady and broad historical connectedness to the relics of the Catholic cult of saints. This continuity is signaled by using the term "secular relics" to refer to the objects that are at the center of this study. The word *relic* derives from the Latin plural "reliquiae," which means "remains."[5] The remnant of a body and its movements, relics of the sacred or secular kind gain their meaning from physical intimacy. What makes a relic a relic is its closeness not only to a once-alive human body, but also to a still-alive body that venerates its tactility. A relic, as the Catholic faith defines it, can be primary (also called first class), meaning an actual organic part of the body, such as a finger bone or hair. A secondary or second-class relic has been in contact with a body and might contain residue of it, such as blood, sweat, or tears. Things that prove embodiment, that have the texture of a life lived: these are relics. The Catholic worship of dead corporeality had its secular counterpart in a highly personal "religion" that became increasingly prevalent by the end of the eighteenth century. Unlike the saints' relics, however, which are venerated by many, the mementos under discussion held their significance because a handful of people, or even just one, loved the individual donor of them. Although this study brings religion into its reading of these objects, it privileges what might be called a "lyrical" reading of them. For secularists, Catholic relics can have a certain poetry about them. Gazing on an ancient vial filled with what is said to be Jesus's tears can have a deep poignancy. With what longing and hope have the faithful over centuries imbued this little historical residue? Without believing in the authenticity of the object, let alone the miraculous abilities ascribed to it, we can still feel the dialectics of imagination and enchantment that enriched this passion for corporeal tokens. These lumps of matter, set in their whimsical or nightmarish narratives, have dreamlike qualities. If one were to dream of objects, one might imagine they could levitate, fill a room with perfume,

begin to bleed or cry, or suddenly become as heavy as a boulder in a desire not to be moved. With their magic, saints' relics are some of the earliest and most powerful Western fetishes – devitalized substance that seems to yet house a soul or an animating spark. Matter, for medieval Catholics, was fertile, "maternal, labile, percolating, forever tossing up grass, wood, horses, bees, sand, or metal," according to Caroline Walker Bynum.[6] No other objects are, arguably, more infused with the special "thingness" the material culturalist studies: with ideas, with interiority, with the metaphysical. "Thing theory" should always start here.

Connecting nineteenth-century British death culture to the distant past is, however, only one project of this book. Pointing to another historical continuity, one that looks forward to twentieth-century attitudes toward death and its materiality, the afterword argues that most aspects of Victorian relic culture disappeared after the Great War. As belief in an afterlife became less and less common, as death became increasingly a medical problem, to be dealt with by science and hospitals, and as the fear of death became so overwhelming that death was something to be denied, the dead body was often treated as an object of loathing. With the rise of secularism, privatization, and medicalization in the late nineteenth century, the slide toward what Diana Fuss has called the death of death had begun.[7] No longer was it common practice to hold onto the remains of the dead. Rarely would a lock of hair be kept, to be worn as jewelry, nor did one dwell on the deathbed scene, linger on the lips of the dying to mark and revere those last words, record the minutiae of slipping away in memorials, diaries, and letters. Rooms of houses were increasingly less likely to hold remains; no one had died in the beds in which the living slept.

The dematerialization and disembodiment of death's mementos – of secular relics of all sorts – occurred also because of changes in technology. In the Victorian era, and for many centuries before it, the written words of a loved or revered one, for example, were still usually holographic. The telegraph, the telephone, the typewriter: these would, starting in the late nineteenth century, largely replace holography. The manuscript references in its very etymology the hand that wrote it. Handwritten texts – such as correspondence, journals or diaries, or professional writing of whatever sort (such as a novel) – become relics of a special kind. The paper may have been chosen by the author of the text. The writer, especially of letters, would often record not only when the text was written, but also from whence, giving not only town or city, but sometimes the name of the abode or inn. Thus steeped in the details of time and place, these artifacts embody specificity – a kind of singular localism. Moreover, the ink that

scored the page might be unique, and handwriting has come to be connected inextricably with the character of the "hand" and the identity of the writer. Many of these documents contain a signature – an incommensurable trace of legal selfhood. Their franking and traveling through the postal system further establishes letters as recorders of individual experience in a historical place and time. Added to these elements that make these documents authentic, irreplaceable artifacts is the status of the pages as contact relics. The actual skin swept the paper, handled it, inscribed it, possibly folded it (not to mention, to return for a moment to saints' relics, wet it with tears, sweat, or, to be dramatic, blood). Letters could contain other types of mementos; they might be relics with further relics inside them. To give a literary example, in Thomas Hardy's 1892 serialized version of *The Well-Beloved* (then called "The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved"), he begins with a chapter called "Relics." The main character sits in front of his fire at midnight, in his London rooms. He is burning personal papers, among them "several packets of love-letters, in sundry hands."[8] When he throws one on the fire, the flames illuminate the handwriting, "which sufficiently recalled to his knowledge her from whom that batch had come" (216). As the room teems with the ghostly presence of the lover who is long gone, represented by her recognizable "hand" on the pages, "suddenly there arose a little fizzle in the dull flicker: something other than paper was burning. It was hair – *her* hair" (217). He had forgotten that he had placed her curl in the envelope with her letter. "'Good heavens!' said the budding sculptor to himself. 'How can I be such a brute? I am burning *her* – part of her form . . . I cannot do it'" (217). A first-class relic nested in a second-class one, her tress evokes her body; her handwritten letter calls up her character. Both can represent her so completely to him that to destroy the packet can feel like annihilating her. A simple way for us to contrast the different understanding the Victorians had of death's ability to infuse materiality is to compare the artifact Hardy's character burns to the majority of the correspondence written from the late twentieth century onward. Letters became increasingly delocalized and stripped of corporeal connection. For instance, e-mails can't contain a tress of hair, a fragment of cloth, a pressed flower; they have no interiority. By the end of the twentieth century, postmortem written remains rarely were touched by disappeared flesh.

As these examples clarify, this history of secular relic love – which reached its height of popularity in the Victorian period and then its decline by World War I – intertwines with a history of the technology of memory or recording devices. Written descriptions are only one means to hold onto

the physicality of the dead. Speaking more materially, the remembrance of the countenance, appearance, and feel of a person was often preserved through drawings, miniatures, paintings, and life or death masks, for the few who could afford such things. Little everyday items had an especially poignant weightiness in the many centuries before more modern recording devices. Clothing, hair, teeth, and characteristic possessions such as a favorite drinking cup became indexical reminders of the body, which had no other concrete means of being carried on into future eras. Rather paradoxically, it was when the most important technology for such recording – photography – came into common use that the popularity of traditional material technologies reached their height. Eventually, photography would come to largely replace relic culture. Just as it was leaving and would soon be mostly obsolete, relic cherishing had its decadence. For a time, photography existed alongside and in conjunction with the older forms, as is taken up more fully in the afterword. It is precisely this transitional nature of the period that makes it the most compelling and consequential era in which to study material memorialization.

This distancing of death and its "thingness" that begins around the first decades of the twentieth century has been taken up by many twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorists and historians. Walter Benjamin is one such thinker who wrote often about what was lost as the nineteenth century became the twentieth. His influential theory of the aura has relevance to a history of death culture despite the fact that it emerges from a discussion of the nature of the "work of art." The aura of an artwork such as a painting consists of its "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."[9] As with the relic, the authenticity of the artwork resides primarily in its "testimony to the history which it has experienced."[10] Benjamin is referring to a more general type of history, one that involves larger units of people, whereas the keepsakes under discussion here testify to personal history. Nevertheless, there is nothing more "auratic," arguably, than death mementos; indeed, relics serve to define precisely what the concept of the aura means. When the mechanical reproduction of the work of art became available in the nineteenth century with, first, lithography, and then, more important, photography, the aura began to be fully appreciated just as it became ever rarer. Benjamin's central argument in the essay – the sense of heightened awareness and relishing of what is just slipping away – works equally well for the history of relic culture. The understanding and subsequent reverence for the aura of art and of death keepsakes came most pervasively only when it was endangered, in decay.[11]

Benjamin believed that turning away from death has led to the disappearance of the art of storytelling. Writing in the early 1930s, he called his contemporaries "dry dwellers of eternity" because "today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death."[12] Avoiding the sight of the dying, one misses the moment when life becomes narrative, when the meaning of life is completed and illuminated in its ending. Benjamin privileges the shared moment of death, when relatives, and even the public, gather around the dying to glean final words of wisdom, to know perhaps, in the end, the whole story. The historian Philippe Ariès describes a Christian account of the final ordeal of the deathbed when in the moment of death the salvation or damnation of the dying is determined, thus changing or freezing, for good, the meaning of the whole life.[13] Similarly, Victorian relic culture sees death, and the body itself, as the beginning of stories rather than their end.[14] Rather than denying death, the relic could help make apparent the terrible poignancy of the body becoming object; it could reenact that moment, again and again. Relic culture expressed a willingness to dwell with loss itself, to linger over the evidence of death's presence woven into the texture of life, giving that life one of its essential meanings.[15]

The past manifest

The story of Victorian relic culture, which includes in its plot the stirrings of widespread agnosticism and atheism, the rise of mechanical mementos in photography, and the fading of material embodiment with the growing commodity culture, can only be selectively told between the covers of one monograph. Death keepsakes had varied meanings to varied individuals and groups; a single relic might shift in significance depending on its viewer or possessor. Even to the individuals who most cherished it, the memento's expressiveness could be blunted or heightened over the years. Sometimes corpses and their leftovers appeared fearful or loathsome to Victorians; other times they were treated with indifference. Although these pages will touch on this larger range of emotions toward the physicality of the dead, they privilege the conventional reverencing – religious and secular – of remains. Texts, acts, and individuals who create excessive performances of such appreciation are also brought to the fore to understand the broader practice (Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites, for instance, and Brontë's representation in *Wuthering Heights*). Chapters are necessarily based on exemplary texts and objects; they represent a vast pool of

instances and depictions of relic love. The depth and breadth of the relish for death's material markers can only be limned here.

One organizing principle of these chapters, and a concern behind the choice of texts and objects, is the shifting terrain of representation in the nineteenth century and the changing relations between language, image, and object. Eschatology played its part in these changes. In certain cases, it even transformed common acts of representation. In forming theories about relics and their texts, representational removes work as essential building blocks. "The thing itself," or the actual corpse and its parts, requires no removes. Body-part stories serve to situate attitudes toward remains and the meanings that seemed to be engrafted onto these fleshly fragments. Contact relics require stepping back one remove. Materials like clothing, paper, and wood represent "the thing itself" because they touched it, therefore also gaining a carapace of personhood. Postmortem art provides an explicit representation of the dying and the dead. Death masks, effigies, and other types of aestheticization picture and sometimes touch the thing itself. Expanding out from the corpse by several removes leads to the consideration of spaces that seemed, to Victorians, to be infused with corporeality, even when the cadaver and its remnants were no longer located there or even locatable. Yet caught up in the very notion of representation are questions of authenticity. A growing complication that can be seen most clearly with hair jewelry, but that affected death culture more broadly, the commodification that came with hairwork's popularity endangered its authenticity. When not infused with the aura of singularity, death keepsakes could become unmoored from their close relationship with one unique body, becoming unstable signs with a representational promiscuity. Just another replaceable, disposable thing among many such things, hair had a meaning that might be easily transferable. The afterword takes up the increasing devaluation of this "thing itself," as death lost much of its embodiment in the first decades of the twentieth century. Threaded throughout all these chapters is the literary representation of relics, with language located at a distant remove from pure objecthood. Words' association with eschatology and the function of narrative and poetry in embodied death are central concerns of this book. An inquiry made repeatedly throughout these pages: has the object, the story, the poem been enlivened by embodied tactility? And another: does representation remain tethered to the body and its materials?

A further subject that has such a deep momentousness to Victorian relic culture that it serves as a means to organize the following chapters is the distinction between religious and secular "readings" of materiality.

Romantic and Gothic constructions of the "beautiful death," a notion steeped in secular individualism, fomented a belief in the importance of the memory of the individual and the faith that their possessions could serve to keep some part of them enlivened, even if only in memory. However, intermingled with this need to hold onto the memory of the beloved was an anxiety that this matter might finally signify nothing and that death was simply meaningless annihilation. Unfolding this dialectic of doubt and its function in Victorian death culture leads to the evangelical "good death," which located in remains an afterlife that kept them enlivened, vigorous, and hence sources of consolation. With the Spiritualists, who took materiality as evidence of a Christian afterlife, the excessive need to replay repeatedly sensational manifestations of spirits' material substance exposed the instability of faith's hold over death culture (and Victorian culture more generally). This shadow of doubt marked already is found fully in atheistic views of perishing, which find in remains the possibly of representing pure loss rather than consolation. The seeping away of the faith that once played over relics could reduce remains to bald, blank things with the comfortless significance that beloved subjectivity turned into rotting matter.

Implicated in these arguments about representational layers and religion is the nature of subjectivity and its relationship to the other. Although the through-line analysis of this book centers on mementos of the dead and the why and how of their collecting, framing, and treasuring by those predeath, a subset of this larger argument includes the self imagining her own thingification in death. In other words, imaginatively locating some aspect of the beloved dead in matter can also involve being able to see oneself as becoming or being material. Envisioning one's own demise, one's self as a cadaver, and even seeing prefigurations of this state of becoming-object in the sequence of daily life are ways of thinking found in the texts of Victorian writers. Throwing oneself out into the object is not far from merging with another. The boundaries between self and other slip; discovering the other in materiality can be a means to both find and lose oneself. All selves disappear into mass imbued with temporality.

The following chapters are arranged along roughly chronological lines, an itinerary that maps historical changes in attitudes toward death, the body, and materiality. Ranging from the Romantics to the start of the twentieth century, the book's focus falls midcentury, the transitional time that most fully brought relic issues into popular discourse. Because the primary ideas of this book have their roots in eras before the Victorian period, some reaching back to more ancient practices of corpse veneration