WRITTEN DEATH

ARMANDO PETRUCCI: *Writing the Dead: Death and Writing Strategies in the Western Tradition.* Pp. xviii + 163, 64 ills. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998 (first published 1995 in Italian). Cased, £25. ISBN: 0-8047-2859-3.

This is one of those books that a reviewer begins reading with great enthusiasm and finishes with great relief. The subject chosen by the author intersects two important areas of cultural study—death and writing—where a range of interesting work has been done in recent years, but the end product falls a long way short of doing it justice. The book deals with the written funerary record in Western culture from its beginnings to the present, seeking to address, as its basic question, 'What has been the function of the funerary uses of writing over time?' (p. xviii). Tomb inscriptions are necessarily its core material, but sculpted forms on tombstones and other tomb monuments, and particularly the relationship between image and inscription, also feature prominently, and Petrucci reaches out beyond this to consider other epigraphical products, manuscripts, and printed matter of different kinds. The main focus, however, is narrower than this spread might suggest; P.'s principal concern is with written forms—lettering, the arrangement of writing (layout, positioning), legibility—rather than content, and this inevitably results in a larger amount of technical discussion than the title and the dust jacket (both cover and blurb) might lead one to suppose.

Despite the vast chronological range, and even allowing this rather tight focus, one could imagine a book on this sort of scale that gave a stimulating overview of the main lines of the relationship between written record of the dead and society, its continuities and changes, through the centuries. For P., however, the choice seems to have been between a book of massive proportions, which he did not intend to write, and the 'highlights' approach which he adopts (see p. xv). This way of proceeding, combined with the division of the text into sixteen short, unnumbered, chronologically arranged chapters, each further subdivided into several discrete sections, with endnotes keyed only to the section as a whole, results in an overwhelming sense of discontinuity and fragmentation; while the scale of the book means that there is little here for palaeographers or specialists in particular periods, for non-specialists the wood is obscured by the trees—the big picture, the wider socio-politico-cultural dimensions of the history of the writing practices which P. is discussing, fails to emerge. The irony is that, as P. himself is aware (cf. p. xvii), writing implies a particular public, but he himself lacks a sure sense of his own public. The reader is also poorly served by the fact that many artefacts and artefact types described in the text are not illustrated—figure diagrams would have assisted greatly with visualization—and that the photographic illustrations provided in the middle of the book are not referred to in the text by their numbers. The only index is an index of names, and there is no composite bibliography.

Four chapters are devoted to classical antiquity. 'From the Sign to the Text' (pp. 5–9) begins, appropriately, with the *Iliad*, and goes on to discuss the introduction of writing on funerary stelai in early Greece, and the spatial relationship between text and image, a relationship as yet not given any standard definition. It was during the Pisistratid tyranny of sixth-century Athens (not fifth-century: a repeated error, due presumably to mistranslation) that, according to P., the text began to be laid out so as to favour reading by the urban public, and in the democratic city of the next

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https://doi.org/10.1093/cr/51.1.136 Published online by Cambridge University Press

century that legibility reached a peak ('The Order of the Text', pp. 10–14). An indication of the book's limitations is given by the fact that little is said in this chapter on the lists of the Athenian war dead, and that what is said (p. 14) is not connected with similar lists from later periods, such as the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial (referred to on p. 119); such association, with appropriate commentary, would have helped both to stress historical continuities and to set in relief the cultural specificity of particular practices.

In considering the increase in epigraphic production in fifth-century Athens, P. writes of 'a notable extension . . . of the right to "written death" to strata of the population until then excluded' (p. 12). The notion of a 'right' to an inscribed memorial is an insistent refrain of the book, recurring (for example) in the discussion of funerary writing in the Roman world ('The Order of Memory', pp. 15–23, at p. 20). But this manner of representing differences between social groups in memorializing the dead—the language of 'right'—is, like much else in this study, taken as a given, without argument or interrogation. P. is conscious that for this and other periods and cultures many factors, such as wealth, literacy, and social habit, some of which may interlock with the notion of 'right', are also involved, but his ideologically cast emphasis tends to distort the picture.

The last of the chapters on the ancient world ('The Names and the Crosses', pp. 24–34) considers early Christian practices, drawing attention to the shift from the clear formal geometry of inscriptions in Republican and early-Imperial Rome to the freer arrangement of Christian funerary epigraphy, the reduction in the amount of text, and the greater importance of symbols. From there the book proceeds steadily through the Middle Ages to the late twentieth century (funkier classicists may enjoy the inclusion of the tomb of Jim Morrison), documenting shifts in writing practice and relating them to cultural change; interesting nuggets can be found along the way, the best perhaps in those chapters where P. allows himself to range more freely beyond the focus on the materiality of the writing (see especially 'Anglo-Americana', pp. 96–102, 'The Middle Class and its Writing', pp. 113–23).

A striking omission from the book is any discussion of the metacommunication between literate and illiterate implied by the use of public writing at times (most of history) when literacy was a minority preserve; indeed, the author seems more interested generally in factual detail than in interpretation, especially on the broader scale. There are also numerous minor errors of various kinds, some arising from translation from the Italian by (one hopes) a non-classicist: hence, for example, 'Santorino' and 'Amorgo' (p. 7), 'Hipparcus' (p. 10), 'Selimbria' (p. 11). On p. xvi we are told that the archaic age came after the Athenian democracy; 'right-to-left' (p. 10) should read 'left-to-right'; on p. 19, for 'the name the stone' read 'the stone the name'; 'reincarnation' (p. 25) is surely an error for 'resurrection'; on p. 66 'Rinaldo' should be 'Rolando'; on p. 88 try 'exaggerated' for 'exasperated'; 'our hearts' (p. 127) does not translate the 'tuoi cari' of the inscription. A more thoughtful translator or editor might also have avoided the abbreviation 'Jeffery, *The Local*' (p. 134), which is not a study of the British pub.

Overall, then, this is a book that tantalizes and frustrates; its main merit is that it points us towards the valuable work still to be written on this important subject.

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