

Anatomy and modern western poetry

H. A. Balcioglu, S. Senlen Guvenc

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper was to illustrate the connection between ‘anatomy’, one of the oldest natural sciences, and ‘poetry’, the most ancient genre of literature. Anatomy and related concepts have been a subject of and used as imagery in poetry since ancient times, but they have never carried such vast and multiple shades of meaning as in the 19th and 20th centuries. There are not only more allusions made to anatomy in modern verse, but also more poets have chosen to dwell upon anatomy, anatomists, dissections and cadavers as a main subject or persona in their poetry. In this respect, the use of anatomy and related concepts as subject and as imagery is examined in selected examples of 19th and 20th centuries Western verse composed by William Wordsworth, Thomas Hood, Charles Baudelaire, Emily Dickinson, Gottfried Benn, Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath and Nadine Sabra Meyer in order to show how anatomy has been perceived and represented by poets.

Keywords: Poetry, Anatomy, Literature, Cadaver, Medical humanities

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INTRODUCTION

Anatomy and related concepts have been a subject of and used as imagery in poetry since ancient times, but they have never carried such vast and multiple shades of meaning as in 19th and 20th centuries. There are not only more allusions made to anatomy in modern verse, but also more poets have chosen to dwell upon anatomy, anatomists, dissections and cadavers as a main subject or persona in their poetry. In this respect, the use of anatomy and related concepts as subject and as imagery is examined in selected examples of 19th and 20th century Western verse. It will be shown that poets have used anatomy and related concepts in the following ways: 19th century poets have dealt with the current status and issues revolving around anatomy such as illegal dealing of cadavers and anxiety concerning it, and the fear-curiosity created by anatomy in the eyes of the public while 20th century poets have preferred to dwell on anatomy and dissection in a more scientific manner reflecting a deeper knowledge and understanding of anatomy.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Up to the Anatomy Act in 1832 in Great Britain, which allowed the dissection of destitutes, cadavers used for

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dissections were largely composed of convicted criminals who were sentenced to such a ‘capital punishment’, murdered victims or those provided by body-snatchers. In certain countries, criminals were dissected and anatomized by surgeons after execution as punishment [1]. For example, the ‘Murder Act of 1752’ in England, which allowed the body to be dismembered after death by the Surgeons Company, was passed because “What was needed, it was felt, was a punishment so draconian, so appalling, that potential criminals would be terrified at the fate which awaited them in the event of their detection” [1]. Since many thought that resurrection of the body promised by Christian doctrine was impossible if the body were anatomized, this ‘precaution’ or capital punishment proved to be successful in decreasing the number of criminals. In *Lives of the Most Remarkable Criminals*, such a public execution in 1741 in which the crowd rioted to prevent surgeons claiming the corpse was described as:

“As soon as the poor creatures were half-dead, I was much surprised, before such a number of peace-officers, to see the populace fall to haling and pulling the carcasses with so much earnestness, as to occasion several warm rencounters, and broken heads. These, I was told, were the friends of the person executed, or such as, for the sake of tumult, chose to appear so, and some persons sent by private surgeons to obtain bodies for dissection. The contests between these were fierce and bloody, and frightful to look at.” [2]

So, dissection was considered as a violation of the ‘sacred’ body eliminating resurrection or a fate worse than death itself, and an act so terrible that it was only fit as a punishment for criminals.

Laws such as the Anatomy Act in 1789 passed in New York and the Anatomy Act in 1832 in England made it possible for doctors to obtain cadavers without resorting to body-snatching, and expanded the legal supply of cadavers for medical research [3]. As a result, it not only contributed to eliminating the public fear of the illegal trade in corpses, but also contributed to the way cadavers were perceived and represented in literature/poetry.

ANATOMY IN 19TH CENTURY WESTERN POETRY

During the 19th century, anatomy progressed and expanded as a discipline, the need for cadavers increased and led to body-snatching and the English Parliament passed the Anatomy Act 1832, *Gray’s Anatomy* was published, dissections moved from anatomy theatres to classrooms, many medical schools were established with medical museums within them. These museums that were open to both students and to the public provided both financial aid and prestige [4]. As a result of such developments, anatomy removed itself from its previous

‘illegal’ position in the eyes of the public to a more prestigious status of being viewed as a science.

In the 19th Century, poets such as William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Thomas Hood (1799–1845), Baudelaire (1821–1867), and Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) generally deal with the contemporary issues relating to anatomy, dissections and cadavers, or reflect the fear and/or fascination concerning anatomy in the period [5–8].

In “The Tables Turned” Wordsworth explores the nature of science, the difference between unmediated experience learned from nature (experience) and information passed on through books. It presents the dual perspective of anatomy dominant in the 19th century: as a science and an ‘unholy’ act. First, as a poet of the romantic age, Wordsworth suggests that people should “quit [their] books” and learn from nature and experience. He further points out that “Books! ‘tis a dull and endless strife:” indicating that “One impulse from a vernal wood/May teach you more of man”. The poet then accuses scientists of changing and murdering nature in the process of studying it: “Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;/Our meddling intellect/Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:--/We murder to dissect”. These two views brings him to a dilemma “Enough of Science and of Art;/Close up those barren leaves;” [5]. The last line in seventh stanza “We murder to dissect” has many connotations. In addition to being used as a metaphor for knowledge and experience, it could be a reference to the cadavers of murdered persons sold to surgeons, or the penetration made to cadavers by surgeons. Since an anatomist has to cut through the flesh in order to study the body, he/she must first ‘murder’ the cadaver in order to dissect it. This ‘murder’ is necessary for the development of science or anatomy. So, Wordsworth, views “dissect[ion]”, the primary source of information for anatomists, both as a criminal act and as a metaphor for ‘study’, ‘research’, ‘experience’ and ‘knowledge’.

In the poem “Mary’s Ghost” [6], Thomas Hood “the first 19th century poet to utilize fully the fictional voice of the corpse” [9] employs a humorous tone in order to satirize the increasing concern over the practice of medical dissection and related body snatching and grave-robbing. The female cadaver and persona called Mary visits her lover William to complain about being dug out of her grave, split into parts, and sold to different doctors to be employed in dissection. She indicates that the arm that had once taken his arm has been sold to “Dr Vyse” and her legs to the “hospital at Guy’s”. Although she vowed that he should have her hand it is now at “Doctor Bell’s,/In spirits and a phial” and as to the fate of her two little feet, which he thought were pretty: “There’s one, I know, in Bedford Row,/The t’other’s in the city.” She states that she cannot tell where her head has gone, but claims that “Doctor Corpue can”, and as for her “trunk, it’s all pack’d up/To go to Pickford’s van.” [6] This unique poem concentrated on a cadaver-victim of body-snatching and

gives her a voice to express her dissatisfaction to her lover concerning her divided parts.

Another 19th century poet, Baudelaire, employs a very dark tone in his poem “Martyr-Drawing by an Unknown Master” that brings to mind the cadavers of criminals. The poem describes the physical features of the cadaver of a murdered young woman lying on the bed. The “red, living blood” pouring out of the “headless cadaver” or decapitated cadaver is absorbed by the linen. The slimness of its angular shoulders, the slightly sharp haunches and the waist sinuous “as a snake poised to strike” reveals that her body is still young. The lines “Did he use your inert, complacent flesh to fill/The immensity of his lust?” and “impure cadaver!” illustrate that she was murdered after copulation, presumably by a client or lover. His choice of presenting the cadaver as a prostitute (“impure cadaver”) seems to be an allusion to cadavers of criminals who were anatomized by surgeons [7].

The cadavers in Hood’s and Baudelaire’s poems are both female and victims; Hood’s Mary is the victim of body-snatchers while the nameless cadaver in Baudelaire is the victim of a murder. On comparison, however, Baudelaire’s cadaver is silent while Hood’s cadaver is given a ‘voice’ to express her discontent.

While some have preferred to dwell on current events or issues relating to anatomy and dissection, others such as Emily Dickinson seem to have concentrated on anatomy in a more positive light. Emily Dickinson, who frequently dwelled on the experience of death in her poetry, deals with anatomy and dissection in “A science-so Savants say”. For her, the cadaver is a retainer of information or mystery that could only be unfolded by anatomists: “A Science—so the Savants say,/ “Comparative Anatomy”--/ By which a single bone--/Is made a secret to unfold/ Of some rare tenant of the mold,/Else perished in the stone--” [10]. The poem emphasizes the vital role played by comparative anatomy, the study of similarities and differences in the anatomy of organisms, in forming a record of the evolution of species. Without anatomists working on cadavers, all the knowledge retained within them will disappear into their grave.

Emily Dickinson also employed cadavers as subject, persona and imagery in her poems in order to “testify to the central tenet of Christianity, namely, that through Christ’s death and resurrection death itself has passed away”. After the experience of death, the cadaver is left to speak his/her mind. Similar to Hood and Baudelaire, Dickinson’s cadavers are almost always female, are generally portrayed as a lively being with a voice and a personality of their own. These cadavers are, to a larger extent, characterized by their “spirited personalities, gruff, overbearing, peevish, and only occasionally tranquil, philosophical, satisfied”. The female cadaver in “Bring Me the Sunset in a Cup”, is annoyed at being deceased and plucked from nature. She makes an appeal to God, or her audience: “Bring me the sunset in a cup,/ reckon the morning’s flagons up/And say how many Dew/

Tell me how far the morning leaps--/Tell me what time the weaver sleeps/Who spun the breadth of blue!” [9]. Then she asks for certain answers in order to understand nature: “How many trips the Tortoise makes--” and “who laid the Rainbow’s piers,” gradually leading to the vital point, her death: “Who built this little Alban House/And shut the windows down so close/My spirit cannot see?/ Who’ll let me out some gala day/With implements to fly away,/Passing Pomposity?” [8]. The female cadaver feels trapped in her mortal body, and expelled from nature. Thus, she longs to get rid of her body in order to experience the world.

ANATOMY IN 20TH CENTURY WESTERN POETRY

In 20th century, poets prefer to deal with actual dissections or imagery relating to it. Contemporary poets, such as Gottfried Benn (1886–1956), Dylan Thomas (1914–1997), W. Maud Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) and K. E. Duffin, provide poetic descriptions of dissections, employing a surgeon/anatomist, a cadaver or an outside observer as the persona of the poem [11–14].

Gottfried Benn, a German doctor-poet specifically dealing with anatomy and forensic medicine in his poems, portrays a dissection of a person with a lavender aster between his teeth in “Little Aster”: “As I cut out the tongue and the palate,/through the chest/under the skin,/ with a long knife,/I must have touched the flower, for it slid/into the brain lying next./I packed it into the cavity of the chest/among the excelsior/as it was sewn up./Drink yourself full in your vase!” [11]. Benn, who generally deals with surgical procedures, and descriptions of decaying and murdered bodies, portrays the cadaver in this poem as nourishing the lavender aster sewed up inside it. This contributes to the creation of a very romantic and positive description of human anatomy.

In “Little Asten”, the persona is a doctor/surgeon/anatomist describing the process of dissection reflects a doctor’s perspective while the cadaver giving life to the flower is silent. In Dylan Thomas’ “I, In My Intricate Image”, [12], however, it is the cadaver who is describing the process of being dissected: “[...] Death instrumental,/ Splitting the long eye open, and the spiral turnkey,/Your corkscrew grave centered in navel and nipple,/The neck of the nostril,/Under the mask and the ether, they making bloody/The tray of knives, the antiseptic funeral;”. Terms such as “Death instrumental”, “splitting”, “Tray of knives” and “The antiseptic funeral” are all details portraying a dissection. In addition, in the last stanza of the poem, the line “Man was Cadaver’s masker, the harnessing mantle,” seems to indicate that man covers, straps, and masks the cadaver. In this case, the ‘cadaver’ has been used as equivalent to the soul instead of the physical body beholding the spirit.

In another poem entitled “Two Views of a Cadaver Room”, Sylvia Plath conveys her impression of a dissection etude after attending one [15]. Mirroring an actual dissection, the poem virtually dissected into two halves: each portion is composed of two stanzas, the first made up of nine lines and the second one of two. The first part of the poem is as follows: “The day she visited the dissection room/They had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey,/Already half unstrung. A vinegar fume/Of the death vats clung to them;/The white-smocked boys started working./The head of this cadaver had caved in./And she could scarcely make out anything/In that rubble of skull plates and old leather./A shallow piece of string held it together.” and “In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow./He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom.”

The persona of the poem visiting the “dissection room” is a stranger to the field of anatomy, which creates an alienation effect. The brow color of the four male cadavers after their fixation leads to their external appearance being described as “black as burnt turkey”. Although this simile refers to food, it is an image that is far from being appetizing. Being opened up by dissection or “half unstrung”, the cadavers carry with them the vinegar scent of “death”, or as it is commonly known, ‘formaldehyde’. The dark vinegar-scented cadavers in the poem stand in juxtaposition with the “white-smocked boys” performing the dissection. The head of this cadaver, in contrast to the “Red, living blood” flowing from the cadaver in Baudelaire’s poem, is covered with “old leather”, which indicates its brownish and hardened skin. The poem also includes a brief description of fetuses as “snail-nosed babies” and her boyfriend handing her a “cut-out heart” like a broken heirloom. The fetuses in jars and the heart pieces are included in the poem as standard materials present in a dissection room.

The second part of the poem moves from the concrete cadaver room to a more abstract space, that of Pieter Brueghel’s (1525-1569) painting entitled “The Triumph of Death” (1560). According to the persona, this painting resembles the scene of the cadaver room: “In Brueghel’s panorama of smoke and slaughter/Two people only are blind to the carrion army:/He, afloat in the sea of her blue satin/Skirts, sings in the direction/Of her bare shoulder, while she bends,/Fingering a leaflet of music, over him,/Both of them deaf to the fiddle in the hands/Of the death’s-head shadowing their song./These Flemish lovers flourish; not for long.” and “Yet desolation, stalled in paint, spares the little country/Foolish, delicate, in the lower right-hand corner.” As Plath points out, the Flemish painter’s work is a “panorama” of death. In the painting, an army of skeletons slaughter the living composed of peasants, soldiers, nobles, a king, and a cardinal by slitting their throat using a scythe, hanging them, and drowning them, etc. The chaos is further reflected by the shipwrecks and black smoke rising from the burning city. By presenting two different views of a cadaver room,

Plath compares anatomists to the army of skeletons in the painting, and the human cadavers to the persons slaughtered by the skeletons. The literary figures used by Plath contribute to the painting of a startling picture of the cadaver room¹.

Compared to the effect of alienation created by Plath, the poet K. E. Duffin treats cadavers and dissection as an ordinary stage of life in the poem “Anatomy Class” [14]: “You begin to be familiar with the dead,/how their minds grow small and leathery,/how the invisible bellows of the rib cage, bled/of breath, becomes a slatted ovoid sea,/a louvered egg, as form mumbles its lines,/a shambles of shadow and bared articulation./This flensing and flaying to sway-backed spine/and vanished eye in its frangible chalky cavern/is how the world falls away from the knife/of time, leaving scattered drawings pinned/where a furtive pulse sped to shuddering white:/a barium moon swallowed by tolerable night,/a viny, strangling hand of winter wind,/a talc of sun dusting foreshortened life.” Duffin displays a scientific stand in which the cadaver is viewed as a familiar object to be studied. Details such as “slatted avoid sea”, “mumbles its lines”, “vanished eyes” are indications that one becomes used to the deformation of the dead.

ANATOMY TODAY

Although there are several examples of poets who portray the ‘cadaver’ or ‘anatomists’ in a positive light in our day, it is certain that not many poets glorify them as Nadine Sabra Meyer does. She pays homage to ‘anatomy’, ‘dissection’, ‘anatomists’, and ‘cadavers’ with her poetry book *The Anatomy Theatre*, especially in her poems “The Flayed Man”, “Cadaver”, “Flab Anatomy”, “Dissection Prayers”, “The Artist at the Dissection”, and “The Anatomy Theatre” [16].

“The Flayed Man” concerns a heroic cadaver who has presented himself as a “martyr for science”: “He has flayed himself for our inspection/[...] Martyr for science, he stands, each muscle/overdeveloped, numbered for the anatomist’s/as if it were possible to slit this human casing, slip/from one’s integument and go on living/in the delicate flesh.” In “Cadaver”, the cadaver is resurrected: “He lies on his side, hips stacked, chest thrown/back, chin thrust forward as in walking, as if,/after his lover has seen to his lovely body/on the white sheets, he will rise and,/with

¹Her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* confirms the extent of her interest in dissections. While narrating her experience of watching Buddy and his friends cutting up “four cadavers”, she describes these cadavers as “unhuman-looking”, their skin being “stiff, leathery, purple-black” and smelling of old pickle jars (formaldehyde). It is noteworthy that she describes one of the fetuses as “smiling a little piggy smile.” while the sight of a woman giving birth (life) on an “awful torture table” is portrayed as making “unhuman whooping noise” and having the potential to “end the human race” [13].

the quivering firefly of his cigarette,/move nude through the predawn kitchen.” As for “Flab Anatomy”, the cadaver and its dissection is put forth through the metaphor of a figurine: “You can open her like a locket,/spring the clasp at her side, spread/her tiny silver hinge; her ivory/navel, a delicate porcelain flap/contrived to reveal and hide/her perpetual gestation [...]”.

In “Dissection Prayers”, anatomists are described as learning to articulate the skeleton, to “string it/with wire” and “make a pageantry of death”. In Meyer’s “The Artist at the Dissection”, the anatomist is apparently portrayed as an artist. Lines such as “[...] the anatomist/aids decomposition, and in each/successive plate he ravages,/their supplicant forms, stripping them/of superficial muscle and denuding/the interior, so that the superhuman/unravel and slabs of flesh hang viscous.” support this imagery. Also, in the poem entitled “The Anatomy Theatre”, Meyer illustrates the anatomist as an illusionist. A female cadaver lies at the centre of the amphitheater: “a woman, the only stillness,/has, like a peach dropped in boiling water,/split down her gravid centre?” while the men placed at the balconies attempt to “touch the cloth/she lies on, a bit of thigh, or the back of the anatomist’s/cape” as if they were their ‘fans’. The way the anatomist and the female cadaver are described resembles an illusion show: “The anatomist, a magician in his dark robes,/his prostrate lady before him, looks out at us/(what secret will he withdraw next? The veined/balloon of her bladder, the umber stalk/ of the umbilicus, the fetus’s tiny froglike foot?)/and raised a finger to bid us attend.” This description, far from reflecting the formal, distant or scientific atmosphere of real anatomy theatres, portrays the ‘anatomist’ and the ‘cadaver’ as entertainers.

Poetry as a literary genre incorporates ‘anatomy’, ‘anatomists’, ‘dissection’ and immortalizes cadavers through words. As observed in the works of poets such as Wordsworth, Hood, Baudelaire and Dickinson, 19th Century Western poetry generally deal with the current issues, fears and biases related to anatomy, or portray the new emerging views about anatomy as a science. This understanding of anatomy is carried further in 20th century by poets such as Benn, Thomas, Plath and Duffin who employ a more scientific approach to anatomy, and deal especially with dissection and cadavers. Among the contemporaries, Meyer stands out by the fact that she pays homage to every aspect of anatomy as a discipline. Overall, In the poems that have been presented in this paper, ‘anatomy’ is reflected as a scientific discipline, knowledge, data, research, and ‘anatomists’ are termed extraordinary persons who have the power to unfold secrets and mystery, as soldiers of the carrion’s army and as illusionists. As for the cadaver, it has been described in a variety ways, including being a metaphor for death and of life, a martyr, as well as an illusionist’s assistant. The growing number of poetic allusions to anatomy and related concepts is a clear indication of the importance attached to anatomy by poets. Also, the various references

made to anatomy show that it will continue to be a fruitful and fascinating subject for poets in the future.

Author Contributions

H. A. Balcioglu – Substantial contributions to conception and design, Acquisition of data, Analysis and interpretation of data, Drafting the article, Revising it critically for important intellectual content, Final approval of the version to be published

S. Senlen Guvenc – Analysis and interpretation of data, Revising it critically for important intellectual content, Final approval of the version to be published

Guarantor

The corresponding author is the guarantor of submission.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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