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Modernism's Re-Imagining of 'the Good Death': a case study of *Bretonnes* by Félix Delmarle

This essay argues that the painting Bretonnes *(1913) by the Futurist Félix Delmarle represents a distinctive modernist use of pre-industrial, communal relations to death*

Félix («Mac») Delmarle's *Bretonnes* (1913) seems an odd painting to be made by a Futurist (fig. 1, pl. XII). It does not seem to celebrate nor even depict technological, industrial modernity, far less dynamic movement or urban life. It features none of the staple subjects of Futurist painting. Indeed, its subject matter, a group of Breton women wearing traditional costume and mourning the fishermen of their community, their husbands and sons drowned at sea, is seemingly far removed from the dynamic, urban modernity that Futurist art so often takes as its subject. Death in *Bretonnes* apparently still has that effect of arresting the lives of others that is defined, or perhaps imagined, by the French social historian Philippe Ariès: «before World War I, throughout the Western world of Latin culture, be it Catholic or Protestant, the death of a man still solemnly altered the space and time of a social group that could be extended to include the entire community»[1]. Yet we cannot deny that this is a typically Futurist painting. Delmarle was the only French artist to formally align himself with Marinetti and his followers. And stylistically, *Bretonnes* is a sophisticated example of the Futurist technique of *simultaneità*. The painting skilfully intertwines different, but related, regimes of time and space to produce a complex, yet cohesive meaning. Delmarle ad-

dresses a fundamental tension in the culture of western modernism. This is the status of death in the administrative, industrial and social modernity of the early twentieth century.

I argue that in its treatment of death and traditional mourning rites, *Bretonnes* rearticulates obsolescent mourning practices within a newly industrialised and surprisingly modern community, deploying them against contemporary discourses of rational and constrained consolation that would pathologise such 'excessive' modes of mourning. Here, therefore, modernism uses inherited, even conservative tropes to imagine novel modes of ethical, communitarian relation within modernity. Delmarle does not, though, do this through an appeal to nostalgia and the notion of the «good old death», a strategy to be found elsewhere in modernist culture where it manifests a phobic response to modernity – for example in Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* and Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges la Morte*. Rather, Delmarle treats these practices as 'modern' by displacing them from their original context and effectively 'industrialising' them, integrating them to the new age. Modernity, as it evolves a suite of technical and administrative disciplines that parallel economic and industrial transformation, does not simply contain and ultimately eliminate archaisms. Within modernity, archaic social prac-

tices which function in a particular manner in one historical moment – such as the communal, socially disruptive mourning we see in *Bretonnes* – become repositioned within another. Within the new era they may operate in a different mode that perhaps anticipates novel, and even utopian modes of social organisation, rather than reinforcing tradition against modernity or recalling now obsolescent ways of life. My argument here derives from Saskia Sassen's model of the evolution of territories, authority and rights in the development first of the post-feudal nation state and subsequently within globalisation; those new «organisational logics» contain, and indeed are structured by, dislocated practices and 'capabilities' that, for Sassen, are primarily juridical and contractual[2]. I loosen and extend the concept of capability to include both social practices and conventions, which also define roles and responsibilities and which, even without juridical definition, legitimate forms of agency. I also include cultural practices of representation within the notion of capability, since they sanction and endorse particular manifestations of power and identity, often – in the early-modern era – in the contractual frameworks that formalise social and economic relation. The conventions that surround death and mourning are particularly illustrative of the concept of dislocation of 'capabilities'.

The European culture that preceded the industrial-administrative modernity of the nineteenth century is understood, sometimes wrongly, as possessed of a cohesive, and sensitised, relationship to death. Death is, indeed, fundamental to the codes of representation of the individual that emerge in the late mediæval and early-modern eras[3]. As a generalisation, we may say that death ensures the continuity of power through its representation: we see this in the royal portrait and the royal funeral, and in the sculpture that attends it[4]. We see it too, progressively established at a more prosaic level in the rites of the minor gentry and the emergent bourgeoisie.[5]

Death is similarly understood to be socially and spatially at the heart of collective life: if the church was at the centre of life in the mediæval or early-modern village, town, and city, then it was invariably accompanied by a graveyard in which the dead of the community were interred. Ariès observes that the sacramental status accorded to the dead within Christianity in the pre-modern era meant that the traditional spatial separation of the living and the dead was «not so much forgotten as inverted»[6]. Because the marking of graves was reserved for those with enough money to buy a marker, and since portable coffins were recycla-

1. Felix Delmarle, *Bretonnes*, 1913, oil on canvas, 116x89 cm, priv. coll. (© Christie's Images Limited, 2011).

ble vehicles for the body's transport to the grave, in the process of interment those digging invariably encountered the remains of previous generations (This is, of course, part of the comedy and pathos that informs the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, where the once-familiar Yorick returns not as ghost – a role reserved for his malign superiors – but as decayed and dispersed corpse). Ariès's at once canonical and deeply problematic history of death in western society is concerned with the spatial and spiritual marginalisation in the nineteenth century of that which had formerly been part of an organic unity with life[7]. His narrative is both so idiosyncratically specific and so loosely universal that it has since been repeatedly qualified and undermined by later historians. Recent studies have demonstrated that there was a good deal of regional and temporal variation in the process that Ariès outlined, even to the point of its reversal. The essays in Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall's recent collection show clearly that, even in the late mediæval and early modern eras, social practices concerning death were anything but cohesive, nor necessarily respectful[8]. If the dead were often regarded as still members of society,

with distinct rights and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* their 'younger' living contemporaries, that role, as with other social relations, as often produced fear and antagonism as it did accord[9]. Nor does Ariès's model of marginalisation necessarily work for the nineteenth century without similar allowances. As Suzanne Glover Lindsay demonstrates, the renewed sacralisation of burial in Parisian cemeteries after the secular interments of the Revolution meant that, even during the Napoleonic period, communities sought « a renewed bond with the dead in terms that have long distinguished Christian funerary rites »[10]. The critical and contextual debates that surround Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1849) show how, even at the mid-century, what has been inaccurately assumed as being by then a given for metropolitan culture also remained a controversial issue in the countryside[11].

If the complex regime of time and space in *Bretonnes* renders his subjects less obvious, Delmarle nonetheless depicts a similarly complex and contested scenario, turning upon the social status of mortality in a rapidly changing society. Mourning in *Bretonnes* is a rite that is fundamentally resistant to modernity's trends, yet it is mourning over 'modern' death. It is death commemorated in the pre-modern fashion and an anachronistic milieu, painted in the beginning of the modern century, in a modernist style. Indeed, the formal complexity of intercalated spaces and times is essential to Delmarle's treatment of his subject. Mourning and commemoration is an integral part of the community both spatially and spiritually. In *Bretonnes* the dead are, on the one hand, claimed by the church and tradition – itself a contested relationship – on the other they belong to a modern, industrial culture. The physical architecture of the church echoes its structuring of the lives and deaths of the community that it encloses, and which in turn constitutes the church as a spiritual entity, yet that space is simultaneously organised and structured by an emblem of modern, industrial work – the modern fishing vessel. Buried in their absence, the dead remain part of the community, in an anachronistic fashion, yet it is both tradition and modernity that allow them to be marked in this way. Communal mourning and remembrance does not, necessarily, need to be tempered to the imperatives of modernity to instrumentalise the human – by demanding moderation and self-discipline – but neither is it any longer the property simply of religion.

Similar assumptions and misconceptions to those that derive from generalised historical paradigms attend traditional, liberal criticism of modernist culture's treatment of death. George Steiner,

for example, understood the dismissal of transcendental values in culture – a consequence of modernism's crises of language – as running parallel to the spiritual emptiness of modern life, where the very notion of an immanent God had vanished, and the death which once supposedly affirmed the individual life and united communities in remembrance was meaningless. Having lost faith in God and language, modernism had lost all capacity to deal with death[12]. A similar accusation was levelled within the explicitly Christian cultural analysis of the Dutch art historian H. R. Rookmaker[13]. However, Ronald Schleifer's close scrutiny of the discursive modes that structure modernism's rhetorical crises shows how changing attitudes to death were articulated in new metonymical functions that were necessarily historically specific[14]. A good example of this can be found in one of the seminal works of modernism's complaint against the inadequacies of language: Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Ein Brief* (1908) derives much of the force of its eloquent and elegantly phrased scepticism from its author's encounter with dying rats in a cellar. I would suggest that in its unusual yoking of modernist style and archaic practice Delmarle's *Bretonnes* is another case in point. My argument here is that a 'capacity' that is displaced, and appropriated, may itself be metonymical. Indeed, death's representation – which includes funerary rites – must necessarily be. If we accept Schleifer's argument, a displaced representational capacity may sustain some non-indexical relation to an object, but it may nonetheless resonate in a profoundly different register because its historical specificity has changed. For Delmarle, the fact of death's constitutive absence – *his fishermen lost at sea* – mirrors an empty language of convention, for neither words nor images exist that might adequately render a sign that stands for nothing. This 'negative materiality' (death, after all, happens, it exists, but it is never there as object) can, however, be rearticulated into presence through a displaced, obsolete trope rendered in a language that eschews the conventional dispositions of time and space. In *Bretonnes*, mourning does not simply come after the catastrophe, it is always already a foundational element within the structure of the community.

Alan Friedman suggests that even though « death leaks into language everywhere » in modernist literature, its authors often evade direct engagement with death: it is « repressed or inadequately represented »[15]. What Friedman repeatedly overlooks is that modernism's experiments with tropes allow its writers, and indeed its painters, to adopt precisely the figures that shape

dominant discourses about death and mourning in modernity. Consider these examples: in *The Magic Mountain* (1924), Thomas Mann dismisses the tragedy of a young woman's death in the brusque, efficient language of medical science and administration. «'An American woman died here day before yesterday,' said Joachim. [...] But she has been gone since yesterday morning, and after they took her away of course they fumigated the room thoroughly with formalin, which is the proper thing to use in such cases»[16]. In the Martello Tower at the beginning of *Ulysses* the medical student Buck Mulligan reflects the dispassionate, indifferent treatment of death that supposedly characterises his discipline, asking «And what is death... your mother's or yours or my own? [...] I see them pop off every day in the Mater and Richmond and cut up into tripes in the dissecting room. It's a beastly thing and nothing else. It simply doesn't matter»[17]. Finally, in *Jacob's Room* (1922) – a novel that Friedman criticises specifically as avoiding death – Virginia Woolf uses as a structural motif the elision of death, the absence of the bodies of the war dead, that is made by the British state after World War I. The war dead were condensed into overseas cemeteries that, if they accorded a carefully orchestrated dignity denied to earlier generations of combatants, were beyond the reach of most of the families of the fallen, existing only as a distanced trope of their loss. The compensatory homecoming was reduced to the soldier's name on town or village war-memorial, or church and workplace plaque. Far from eliding a pervasive presence of death in post-war society, Woolf accurately reflects its pervasive absence and condensation into state-sanctioned spectacle. There is something of this, too, in *Bretonnes*. Death is similarly remote: we do not see drowning men, we see gravestones and we see the waves and we see remembrance, and we see evidence of their dangerous industry. The painting evades pathos and identification with either victims or mourners – indeed, there is a ghastly, alienating property to the mourners, especially in their faces, that suggests they already carry death within them[18]. I argue that Delmarle's handling of his subject, indeed his turn to it as a subject, is 'conservative' in its reaction to modernity. Yet, in its appeal to mourning practices rendered redundant by changes to social life, *Bretonnes* participates in a novel approach to ethics and death that is characteristic of modernism's response to its time. Far from being a terminal event, death in communities that resist, or somehow sit outside administrative-industrial modernity, is processual: it is woven into the time/space fabric of the community.

Delmarle uses the most up to date of techniques, which allow him to manipulate time and space, to represent and reflect upon the virtues of this archaic state of affairs.

The left side of *Bretonnes* is based upon the internal architecture of a church. Delmarle uses the arches that form the vault of the roof in a series of arcs that connect that top centre of the canvas to its left edge to create an interior space in which his subject is positioned. The curve of this feature is picked up in the backs of perhaps six women who stand in a row, facing to the right with heads and shoulders bowed. The colour of these women's coats shares the same palette as the vault of the roof. It shades from black to a lighter grey that carries overtones of ochre. Shoulders and patches of shadow are built up slightly in the application of a thicker black. Darker around the figures necks and shoulders, the tone lightens progressively towards the lower edge of the painting. Through this shared tonality and palette the women are clearly figured both as belonging to the church as a physical structure, and as extending it. Across the lower left corner of the painting a diagonal line is established, sloping towards the middle of the painting's lower edge and effectively mirroring the curve of the roof vault. This line is created with the flat tops of rectangular tombstones, rendered in off-white. Ten of these bear the identical text «mort en mer» in black, accompanied by a small cross. Three bear the names of the dead man they represent: Le Kardec, La Braz, Le Coze – all distinctive Breton surnames. All the stones are arrayed at the same angle, so that their left edge is effectively aligned with the bent backs of the mourners. Each of these inscribed surfaces is imbricated with the others, but most significantly, they are also intercalated with the women's coats. Indeed, the stooped backs of the women might almost imply that, as much as they are obeisant to the sacred objects that occupy the right side of the picture, they are bent in the labour of mourning. Their stance allows Delmarle to yoke human mortality and spiritual redemption through the labour of intercession. Here the simultaneist technique is at its most effective, for Delmarle effectively 'hooks' the coats into the space of the graves, connecting the domain of the dead with the field of remembrance, and the overarching structure of the church (fig. 2). The exterior domain, the village or town graveyard, becomes interior. The dead fishermen are as much constituents of the church as those who mourn them. The painting thus reiterates the traditional insistence of the Christian church on its composition by all believers who have lived, who live now, and who will

live in the future, rather than simply being constituted by the living. The painting reveals the degree to which death is constitutive of community; however, it also reveals that the church is perhaps nothing more than a communally produced structure in which mortality may be accommodated and understood.

This exchange of worlds stops neither with the intimacy of living and dead, nor with different kinds of work. Delmarle uses his blending of the women's coats into the already painted domain of the gravestones to create a mottled effect and a series of grey horizons within that field. The consequence is that one sees through the stones to a beach and even, in the darker and finer brush strokes at their upper edge, to waves and salt-spray, produced with small, curved strokes of a dry white. This dappled effect is particularly pronounced at the centre of the work, along its lowest edge, where Delmarle creates the look of sunlight reflecting on the ocean. The gravestones are thus placed in the sea, or at its very edge, as befits a group of men who have drowned. The community, and death as an integral event within its life, is thus located firmly within a defined natural environment: life, even up to, and including death, thus belongs organically to the space that it inhabits, rather than being alienated from it (fig. 3).

Each of the praying women wears traditional white Breton head-dress, and it is only in this head-dress that Delmarle uses a minor repetition of individual forms to suggest either a movement from left to right by the women, or the nodding of their heads. However, each figure has a single, clearly defined head, though only in the foremost is the face visible, seen in profile. And it is here that Delmarle creates an extraordinary effect. The left side of the face is rendered in yellowish flesh tones. A near vertical division of the face, almost along the line of a cheek-bone, arrests this field, with the line extending subtly into the woman's head-dress through the use of a thick, bright white to its right, applied in short horizontal strokes that contrast to the longer, smoother strokes used for both face and the rest of the head-dress. On the right side of this divide, Delmarle switches to a ghastly yellow-green palette, as if painting the decaying skin of a skull. This effect is emphasised both by his refusal to develop recognisable features in the face and the large black socket of the figure's right eye. The mourning woman's face thus switches from life to being itself already dead, as she mourns the dead (fig. 4). This woman's hands work a rosary, with the vertical fall of beads extending the central divide of the painting towards its lower edge. At the rosary's end is a Latin *crux fourchette*, which

hangs as if suspended in or over the sea and echoes the simpler Latin crosses on the gravestones. However, in this community of women, I would suggest that Delmarle offers a further allusion to the church as structure produced by a community rather than one that offers consolation in return for acceptance of an imposed system of beliefs. As numerous historians of institutional religion and popular belief have shown, the practices of the former were very often shaped by the far-older, and communally grounded, beliefs and practices of the latter – with associations of women often being especially influential, and at times thus perceived as a threat to institutions[19].

Above and to some extent painted over the women's heads, as if floating in the vault of the church, is a screen of candles. Their wax is rendered in some of the same palette as is used to fashion the foremost woman's skull-face. These candles not only occupy the upper centre part of the painting's surface but seem to recede into the space of the church itself. There is, however, a sharp division in the painting at which they abruptly stop. If we follow this line down the middle of the painting it is continued in the vertical edge of a rectangle that blends from dark grey to black. This form develops from the coat of the foremost mourner and provides an edge, almost, one might say, a window, through which the sea and the graves are seen. This clear delineation in the painting is, I suggest, between the personal and the institutional, for on the right of the painting Delmarle offers a series of representations of the official trappings of religion.

The vaulting of the roof is the only feature that might be said to transgress this division, suggesting an encompassing architecture that is at once institutional and universal, at once temporal and sempiternal. Below its rightward extension there is a brilliantly coloured stained glass window, its facets rendered wholly as abstractions. In front of this is a grey statue brushed lightly with gold. From its gold halo we might conclude that it is either a saint or perhaps the Virgin Mary. That it is almost certainly female is suggested by the swell of breasts and the swirl of fabric below a waist that is defined by a folded, cradling arm. The space beneath this statue is divided vertically into two: on the left Delmarle introduces within the structure of the church the extraordinary figure of a sailing boat, with its masts and spars painted in such a way as to make it almost an integral part of the ecclesiastical architecture. The masts parallel the mass of candles suspended to its left and reach up into the vault of the roof as if they were columns supporting it. As he does with the face of the

2. Felix Delmarle, *Bretonnes*, detail, 1913
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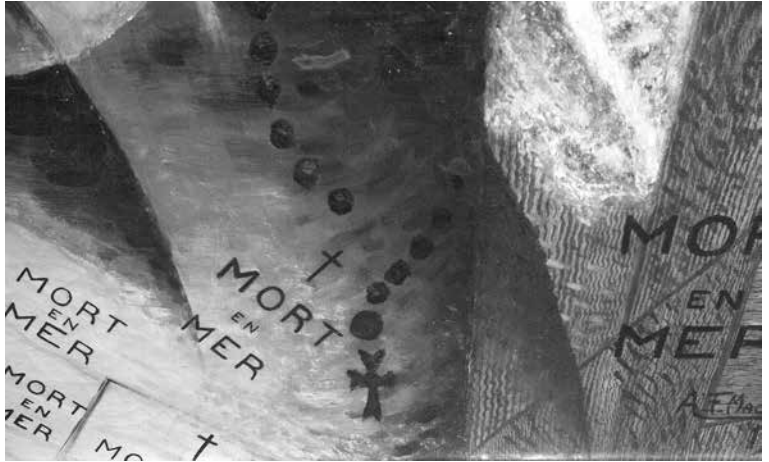
3. Felix Delmarle, *Bretonnes*, detail, 1913
(© Christopher Townsend, 2012).

4. Felix Delmarle, *Bretonnes*, detail, 1913
(© Christopher Townsend, 2012).

foremost mourner, Delmarle makes a small but significant split in the figure of the boat. However, where that facial divide was achieved entirely through the palette and brush-work, here there is a small but significant formal displacement. On the left the prow is seen head-on, its side defined by a horizontal white line decorated by a single black dot. On the right this line declines from left to right and is seen side on, with several dots visible. Above it is a small triangle of black rendered in short horizontal strokes. The simple interpretation of this might be that if in one space and time Delmarle shows us the boat at sea or safely in harbour, in the adjoining space and time he shows its demise; the boat is sinking with the loss of its crew.

That space, however, is clearly defined between the community and the institution. For the lower right hand quarter of the picture, from beneath the statue of the saint or Virgin, is clearly figured as an altar. The nearest mourning figure is bent forward directly over a wooden panel, its grain carefully rendered in thin black vertical lines. This screen tilts into the painting, establishing a false sense of depth, so that all the mourners might be arrayed along it. Delmarle develops it into a side panel that occupies the right hand corner, bearing the tombstone text «Mort en mer». This structure is fringed with a white tracery – embroidered cotton or lace, with the repeated motif of a cross in a double circle. The second horizontal extension of this lace – as it were, the far edge of the altar – establishes a line on which the boat rests, as if the lace were also the breakers of the sea.

Against the physical and spiritual disorder and entanglement that the earlier intercalation of life and death implied, industrial modernity progressively imposed regulation and separation. Modernity transformed mourning rituals and the signifying of the dead, without abolishing commemoration or immediately marginalising the body. Before the nineteenth century tombstones were expensive: it was mostly the graves of the growing middle-class that were so signed. The working class or peasant body often went un-marked, if not un-remarked, and was often placed in a village or town grave in the same manner as had characterised the early modern era. The scale of modern cities meant, however, that the deaths of their populations could not be accommodated within the small patches of earth around centrally located churches, no matter how much recycling of burial space was possible (Furthermore, with the increased use of coffins for burial and dedicated graves for individuals and families such recycling within graveyards must have

been diminished, rather than accelerated in an attempt to keep pace with the death rates of the modernising city)[20]. The solution, for the urban planners of the early nineteenth century was to locate new, larger cemeteries towards the margins of towns and cities. Ariès gives as examples Père-Lachaise and Montparnasse in Paris, Highgate in London and Mount Auburn in Cambridge, outside Boston[21]. By the end of the nineteenth century yet larger necropolises would be demanded, located in, and built on a scale equivalent to, the new suburbs that they served. These cemeteries were themselves planned, rather than haphazard; where the place of burial might once have been at the whim of the family or priest, or the convenience of the grave-digger, the location of the plot now followed a systematic pattern, often a grid or modification thereof, that likewise mimicked the rationality and planning that was gradually being applied to modern urban living. These cemeteries achieved a rigid separation of the living and the dead. The body was placed outside of the economy of modern life. If the dead body was now routinely marked where it was once, most often, anonymous, it was also marginalised. Such distance did not necessarily or immediately end the commerce between the living and the dead that might have characterised preceding centuries; rather, it systematised this traffic too, offering the cemetery as no longer a *campo santo* inhabited by the saints, but a secular public park where the memory of the deceased might be safely encountered and managed, dressed with occasional monuments to public benefactors and those state or civic dignitaries not deemed significant enough to justify a more prominent epitaph downtown. Rather than simply being concerned with appropriate disposal, this management of death might be taken in its broadest sense to include any unhealthy preoccupation with the dead beyond the limits of appropriate mourning, so that those who survived might maintain, or regain, their use value. Indeed, by being commemorated in a suburban park, the dead continued to serve a useful purpose, participating in an economy of leisure and relaxation that ameliorated the demands made upon industrial, domestic and clerical labour in the working week. By contrast, in *Bretonnes* death is an integral part of communal life, both spatially and in social practices. As much as the community is concomitant upon particular modes of labour – fishing, and its associated industries – it is also structured by human mortality and frailty.

In its attention to mourning, Delmarle's painting thus looks fondly upon an aspect of traditional culture – a surprising, even dangerous move for

a Futurist, given the vitriol that Marinetti so often expended upon tradition in both manifestos and public lectures. Yet there is an aspect of modernity that penetrates the seemingly unchanging relation of communal life, and death, and religious faith that the painting depicts. In *Bretonnes* there are no bodies, of course, each man who died is described as dead at sea, yet there is a tombstone to cover this absence, and a name. There is, in other words, a textual marker that will persist into the future, and one that will belong to the church, as space and as temporal architecture, and to the community that it encloses. The 'conservative' project of *Bretonnes* is, then, the restitution and projection of that which cannot be represented: the absent, dead body is carried forward as text, within the structures of the church and community and in the practice of 'excessive' communal mourning. The radical painting makes a mark of respect to the way in which an apparently marginalised, rural, pre-modern, community acknowledges its dead. Delmarle thus uses another distinctive strategy of modernist painting, the introduction of text, to identify those dead who formerly, before modernity, went un-named. If the structures of the church organise the painting and its subject, its foundation stone, quite literally, is the tombstone. Delmarle's recourse to tradition here, through modernist technique, is not, I think, unique to painting. As Tammy Clewell shows in her studies of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, in the first half of the twentieth century modernist literature reinvents sustained mourning at a time when the social imperatives are to limit commemoration through consolation and closure[22]. Tanya Dalziell has recently observed that «Woolf's work may be seen to gesture towards an ethical way of confronting loss and grief that troubles and disrupts the medical paradigm in which mourning is persistently positioned»[23]. Ariès claimed that modernity removed death and mourning from social discourse and ritual through secularisation, spatial displacement and hospitalisation[24]. If there are readings of the same history that contest those causes, it would also be true to say that modernity quickly produced psychoanalytically and medically approved models of behaviour and discourse by which death could be acknowledged in an 'appropriate' manner[25]. The evolution of those models ultimately allowed the appropriation of sociologically investigative critiques of death's displacement, for example that of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, as prescriptive formulations for the 'proper' acknowledgment and limitation of death's social consequences[26]. Such scientifically guaranteed constraint was ostensibly for

the good health of the subject, but was also convenient for modern capital and the state in terms of the recovery of full use value in the survivor. Clewell argues that this reinvention of mourning in modernist culture manifests itself not only as content but also as aesthetic form[27]. However, far from simply contesting dominant paradigms, I argue that modernism derives these forms from the re-articulation and displacement of developing, and recently accepted norms – for example in Woolf's adoption of elision as structural motif in *Jacob's Room* – and obsolete modes – as in *Bretonnes.*

I further suggest that, for all his emphasis on archaic community and practice, Delmarle undertakes something different to the romantic investment in «the good old death» that, for instance, characterises Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. At the turn of the new century Rilke recoils from what he sees as the industrial production of death in that exemplar of modern cities, Paris. He describes hospitals, public institutions for the general improvement of health, as structures that strip the individual of dignity and destroy a relationship with death that should be that individual's rightful property. «This excellent Hôtel goes back a long way. In the days of King Clovis, people were already dying in some of the beds. Now they die in five hundred and fifty-nine of them. It is a factory production line»[28]. For Rilke the individual carries within him the capacity to die «a great death» which the impersonal institutions and industrial productivity of modern life render impossible[29]. Rilke opposes multiplicity with scarcity, ubiquity with specificity, the quiet, domesticated death with one charged with rage, terror and social chaos in the demise of Malte's grandfather which disrupts all conventions of labour and social relation to quite horrifying effect[30]. Delmarle, in contrast, introduces elements of modernity that contradict what would otherwise be a romantic and nostalgic approach to his subject matter, and he insists upon social cohesion – community – as an effect of death. Where, for Rilke, the modern dead may drop in the street with almost no attention being paid, for Delmarle they are named, and remarked, even in their absence.

Although mourning peasant women might be considered an unusual subject for Futurist painting, Brittany undoubtedly was an alluring locale for modernist painters. From the 1880s a number of Parisian artists identified amongst the Breton agricultural and fishing villages a vibrant, seemingly primitive community that nonetheless collectively and, in its lived experience, intuitively

embodied the modernist ethos. Gauguin would proclaim in a letter of 1888: «J'aime la Bretagne, j'y trouve le sauvage, le primitif. Quand mes sabots résonnent sur ce sol de granite, j'entends le ton sourd, mat et puissant que je cherche en peinture»[31]. In many ways Breton peasant life was different from that found in the bulk of France's rural communities: its ethnic roots, its linguistic traditions (Breton was not a Latinate language, but Celtic) and its geographical isolation all created a sense of distinction that could be romanticised by visitors from the metropolis. However, as Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock have observed, modernism's investment in Breton life skated over both the economic and social deprivation that had afflicted the region throughout its history and the subsequent radical transformation of its economy in the nineteenth century in response to the demands of the modern metropolis[32]. Orton and Pollock observe that the contemporary contextual presentation of modernist paintings of Breton culture reiterated the romantic investment made by visiting metropolitan artists[33]. They also show that despite the claims for the region as marked by extreme poverty, religious piety and a culture of melancholy and fatalism, Brittany was in fact one of the exemplars of modernisation in nineteenth century France. It was a rich agricultural region; whilst in 1848 it had been one of the poorest in France, by 1900 it was one of the most productive, thanks to improvements in cultivation techniques. Population had increased rapidly in the same period. Of particular importance for Delmarle's painting is the development of the sardine and tuna fishery, based upon Concarneau. Fishing was a long standing practice here: even in 1877, before development in the region was fully underway, 1,200 boats operated from Concarneau, and some 13,000 people were employed in canning, salting and preparing the catch for transport to France's burgeoning cities[34]. The Breton fishery became the subject of numerous paintings and even a novel, in Pierre Loti's *Pêcheur d'islande* (1886).

Breton costume and custom figures in Gauguin's *La Vision après le sermon* (1888) with its be-coiffed women watching the spiritual reflection of what may have been a real wrestling bout witnessed by the artist at a Breton 'pardon' or fête. Several of Dagnan-Bouveret's paintings made in 1886-87 treat their Breton subjects as picturesque rural novelties whilst rendering the detail that Gauguin leaves out. Vanguard and Salon painter alike make particular investments in Breton culture that revolve around a celebration, and preservation, of an imagined, authentic culture that elsewhere had been lost to modernity. This is a persistent trait of art within modernism, and beyond, of course: indeed, we see it reiterated with every fresh generation of suburban, middle-class art students colonising formerly unfashionable, and relatively impoverished parts of cities, and imagining that they too somehow acquire a patina of authenticity that their origins would otherwise deny them. The avant-garde tourist presents in art the spectacle of pre-modernity that it expects to find, rather than rendering the complex actuality. Each of these acts of imagination involves a kind of mourning by a class created by modernity for an imagined autochthonous identity and tradition that modernity has annihilated. However, the authenticity that is mourned is itself spurious, a seemingly necessary belief to be held by the bourgeois that imputes to itself a redemptive moral agency – in the preservation of authentic residues of pre-modernity – and in the inhabiting of supposed authenticity compensates for the felt (or actual) vacuity of bourgeois culture.

Artists were perhaps aping some of the habits of life that economic necessity compelled upon the peasantry – we should note that Gauguin has swapped his boots for *sabots*, or clogs. But it may also be the case that the Brittany that Gauguin and others of the Pont-Aven school inhabited was as much a region of the imagination as was a barely post-mediæval Bruges for the symbolist writer Georges Rodenbach in his novel *Bruges la Morte* (1892). Here an imaginary city-of-the-dead becomes a site where the failings discerned in modernity's treatments of representation and death may be defined by comparison to older modes. In this sense – we should add to it the invocations of a conservative Catholic theology and a rampant misogyny – *Bruges la Morte* is seemingly typical of those early-modernist artworks that recoil from the technical and social innovations of their time. The novel fits comfortably those critical paradigms that see Symbolism as offering antidotes to an incomprehensible and intractable modernity. And yet, Rodenbach 'cures' modernity by being modern, writing the first modernist novel to use photographs, and by being antediluvian, simultaneously writing an allegory of photography's malign potential. Rodenbach undertakes a radical experiment with the diagnostic medium of modernity: his critique is conducted through the medium he deplores, deployed within and, crucially, used as if it were text[35]. Rodenbach's Bruges, however, is an imaginative construct, a fictional emblem of the past used as a basis for a critique of modernity. As Sharon Hirsh shows, although Bruges had lost its pre-eminent economic status in Early Modern Europe because of the silting up of the River Zwyn

in the late fifteenth century, by the nineteenth its isolation was being addressed through the building of the port of Zeebrugge (which symbolically reconnected Bruges to modernity)[36].

I argue that Delmarle undertakes a similar project here to Rodenbach: employing modern tools to depict the old death. Their crucial difference, however, is that where Rodenbach privileges a romanticised and illusory tradition within his novel combination of image and text, Delmarle incorporates modernity to tradition, privileging a traditional way of death within a new way of life. *Bretonnes* is neither a conventional painting of the fishery nor of a community's women mourning, or anxiously awaiting the return of their men – a subject typified not only by French salon painters working in Brittany but by British painters such as Walter Langley, working in a related Celtic margin, Cornwall. Nor does Delmarle indulge in the picturesque or the romantic. By contrast, in *Bretonnes*, it is the women who undertake a kind of active work: their backs are bent in the labour of intercession between the graves and the church and between the graves and the fishing boat. This is a painting that suggests, in its common architecture – the curve of those backs and the arcs of the church's vaulted roof – that the women are not simply those left behind by death or distant labour, but the vital structure of the community, quite literally holding it together. Furthermore, Delmarle acknowledges the modernity in which custom is preserved. I have already drawn attention to the standardised gravestones, but the fishing boat in the right centre of the painting is equally important. Delmarle may indulge in some license in order to stress the cruciform aspects of the masts, but clearly this is a large, two masted vessel. Rather than depicting a quaint and, in the context of the Breton industry, obsolete day-boat, Delmarle shows, however tangentially, the industrial nature of the dead men's labour.

So, in *Bretonnes* we might say that the dead belong to the community as they did in the mediæval or early modern eras. Death is integral to the community – put there not just in a composition that might reflect a curious archaism, but by the very technique of simultaneism. Yet it is not death romanticised, in the manner of Rilke, nor one that uses the symbol of death to belabour modernity in the manner of the Symbolists: this is a modern community in its work practices, in its economic linkages to the fast-growing French and other European cities. Delmarle's subject is thus at once modern yet conditioned by a displaced, obsolete «capability» of mourning and intimacy with the dead that seems to contradict modernity's imperative for distanced, displaced relation both

between living and dead and – in daily life - between subject and power. In making this unusual juxtaposition, Delmarle uses the rhetorical capacities of modernist painting to proffer a potentially radical, one is tempted to say ethical, relationship between life and death within industrial and administrative modernity.

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NOTES

1. P. Ariès (H. Weaver trans.), *The Hour of our Death*, London, 1981, p. 559.
2. S. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton, NJ, 2006, pp. 18-19.
3. J.L. Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Chicago, 1993, p. 64; A. Pigler, *Portraying the Dead*, in «Acta Historiae Artium Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae», 4, nos. i-ii (1956), pp. 1-74.
4. See, *inter alia*, E. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton, NJ, 1957; R.E. Giesey, *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France*, Geneva, 1960; L. Marin (M. Houle trans.), *The Portrait of the King*, Minneapolis, 1988; J. Woodward, *The Theatre of Death: The Ritual Management of Royal Funerals in Renaissance England, 1570-1625*, Woodbridge, 1997; S. Jugie, *The Mourners: Tomb Sculptures from the Court of Burgundy*, New Haven, CT, 2010.
5. R. Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480-1750*, Oxford, 1998.
6. Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, cit., p. 41.
7. *Ibidem.* See also P. Ariès (J. Lloyd trans.), *Images of Man and Death*, Cambridge, MA, 1985, p. 238.
8. B. Gordon, P. Marshall (eds.), *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, 2000.
9. B. Gordon, P. Marshall, *Introduction*, in *The Place of the Dead*, cit., p. 6; Gordon & Marshall provide an effective summary of the work of, *inter alia*, N. Zemon Davis, *Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion*, in

C. Trinkaus, H. O. Oberman (eds.), *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, Leiden, 1974, pp. 307-336 and *Ghosts, Kin and Progeny: Some Features of Family Life in Early Modern France*, in «Daedalus», vol. 106, n. 2 (1977), pp. 87-114; R. Muchembled (L. Cochrane trans.), *Popular and Elite Culture in France, 1400-1750*, Baton Rouge, LA, 1985; R. Dinn, *Death and Rebirth in Late Medieval Bury St. Edmunds*, in S. Bassett (ed.), *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100-1600*, Leicester, 1992; P.J. Geary, *Exchange and Interaction between the Living and the Dead in Early Medieval Society*, in his *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca, NY, 1994; N. Caciola, *Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture*, in «Past and Present», 152 (1966), and *Spirits Seeking Bodies: Death, Possession and Communal Memory in the Middle Ages*, in *The Place of the Dead*, cit., pp. 66-86.

10. S. Glover Lindsay, *Funerary Arts and Tomb Cults: Living with the Dead in France, 1750-1870*, Farnham, 2012, p. 9.

11. See T.A. Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France*, Princeton, NJ, 1993, pp. 291-302; T.J. Clark, *The Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, London, 1982, pp. 136-138; M. Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, Chicago, 1990, pp. 116-118; L. Nochlin, *Innovation and Tradition in Courbet's* Burial at Ornans, in W. Kahn *et al.* (eds.), *Essays in Honor of Walter Friedlaender*, New York, 1965, pp. 119-126; J. Rubin, *Realism and Social Tradition in Courbet and Proudhon*, Princeton, NJ, 1980; S. Levine, *Courbet, Bronzino and Blasphemy*, in «New Literary History», vol. 22, n. 3 (summer 1991), pp. 677-714.

12. G. Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, New Haven, CT, 1971.

13. H.R. Rookmaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, London, 1970.

14. R. Schleifer, *Rhetoric and Death: The Language of Modernism and Postmodern Discourse Theory*, Urbana, IL, 1990, pp. 1-11.

15. A.W. Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 19.

16. T. Mann (H.T. Lowe-Porter trans.), *The Magic Mountain*, London, 1999, p. 12.

17. J. Joyce, *Ulysses*, London, 1986, p. 7. Mater and Richmond refer to two different hospitals in Dublin: the Richmond Lunatic Asylum and the Mater Misericordiae.

18. I am grateful to Sergio Cortesini for his insightful remarks on the extent to which the mourners are themselves already dead.

19. See, *inter alia*, Zemon Davis, *Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion*, cit., pp. 308-311; K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, 1971; C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, London, 1964; J. Michelet, *Witchcraft, Sorcery and Superstition*, New York, 1996, first published as *La Sorcière*, Brussels, 1863.

20. The eminent urban geographer Peter Hall, in a BBC radio broadcast in 2010, described the cities of the nineteenth century industrial revolution as 'killing machines'.

21. Ariès, *Images of Man and Death*, cit.

22. T. Clewell, *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism*, Basingstoke, 2009, pp. 25-89.

23. T. Dalziell, *«Why then grieve?» Virginia Woolf's Mournful Music*, in «Modernist Cultures», 8, n. 1 (2013), p. 85.

24. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, cit., p. 595.

25. See for example, D. Cannadine, *War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain*, in J. Whalley (ed.), *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, New York, 1981, pp. 187-242. Cannadine argues that the decline in mourning rituals was a consequence of reduced death rates and the excessive cost of funerals.

26. Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*, cit., pp. 27-28.

27. Clewell, *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism*, cit., p. 6; On Woolf and mourning see also, M. Spilka, *Virginia Woolf's Quarrel with Grieving*, Lincoln, 1980.

28. R.M. Rilke (Michael Hulse trans.), *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, London, 2009, p. 6. When Rilke wrote of the Hôtel-Dieu it was still, for a few years yet, a religious institution and not incorporated into the state's formal provision of health care. Harding points out that there were over 4,000 deaths in the Hôtel-Dieu in 1670, almost a fifth of the total deaths in the city. It was, then, always a 'factory'. V. Harding, *Whose Body? A Study of Attitudes towards the Dead Body in Early Modern Paris*, in *The Place of the Dead*, cit., p. 172.

29. R.M. Rilke (S. Ranson, trans.), *The Book of Poverty and Death*, in B. Hutchinson (ed.), *Rainer Maria Rilke's* The Book of Hours, Rochester, NY, 2008, p. 165.

30. Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, cit., p. 7.

31. Paul Gauguin to Emile Schuffenecker, 1888, in V. Merlhès (ed.), *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: Documents, Temoignages*, Paris, 1984, p. 172.

32. F. Orton, G. Pollock, *Les Données Bretonnantes: La Prairie de Représentation*, in F. Orton, G. Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, Manchester, 1996, pp. 53-88.

33. *Ibidem*, p. 59.

34. T. Zeldin, *The Oxford History of Modern Europe, France 1848-1945, Volume I. Ambition, Love and Politics*, Oxford, 1973.

35. As I show in my forthcoming *Modernism and Death*, in the original version of the novel Rodenbach subjects the photographs to some of the same syntactical devices that he uses in his writing: repetition, displacement, and mirroring. Rodenbach thus treats photographs as if they were a kind of text, capable of allusion, metaphor, and an abstracted *poesis*, rather than communicating literal content. I argue that this comparative deployment is crucial to his critique of contemporary discourses promoting photography's veracity.

36. S. Hirsh, *Symbolism and Modern Urban Society*, Cambridge, 2004.