Thomas Arentzen:

Dissolving with Lazarus:

Late Ancient Liturgical Bodies in Pieces

The day before Palm Sunday, early Christians celebrated the biblical figure of Lazarus. This article surveys late ancient liturgical compositions for this feast. It explores the way in which the authors described the disintegration and reintegration of Lazarus' body. His death and reinvigoration surely point towards the resurrection of Christ; yet the detailed and morbid displays which these liturgical texts create suggest that the authors worked with more complex pallets. I argue that we should resist the temptation of a simplistic reading of the Byzantine liturgical past. Scholars are currently rediscovering the subtleties of Byzantine literary composition, but religious texts are still largely viewed as simple, didactic and naïve. Lazarus actually appears as a grotesquely dynamic corpse. At the same time his body is just as ordinary and human as any of the people who heard the macabre stories. He was them. This makes the liturgical works into texts about the churchgoers' decay. I suggest that the authors projected the chilling imagery of dissolving bodies with an aim similar to that of modern writers of grotesque literature; it speaks to the ambivalent awareness of human mortality. The homilists and hymnographers addressed the abject embodied experiences of their congregation.

There are mornings when one wakes up and feels like Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Franz Kafka's novella "Metamorphosis." In this famous moment of modern literature, Samsa opens up his eyes and sees that during the night he has been transformed into a bug. When we look in the mirror and notice those wrinkles and grey hairs, when we smell our own foul breath as we wake up, or when we, perhaps, see an ulcer or a tumour at work in our body, the decay of this world, it is ultimately the forces of death that show themselves to us, in us. They are the faces of death in our flesh. Changes in our human bodies often scare us, because bodily changes suggest that we are mortal.

This article explores how liturgical authors of the late ancient period used the occasion of Saturday before Palm Sunday to expand on bodily disintegration. What function did the rather bizarre scenes of human dissolution have? What does it mean to stare at a creepy body? I suggest that the early Christian authors, not unlike Kafka, addressed the ambivalent human awareness of physical mortality. They crafted their texts so that dissolving corpses might clearly appear in front of the listeners' eyes.

The horror of decay

Before we turn to the liturgical realm and Lazarus, however, let us glimpse at a few non-liturgical texts and consider some ways in which early Christians dealt with

death and corruption of the body more generally. One way involved using distorted bodily features to characterize corrupt or evil individuals. In a scholium attributed to Apollinaris of Laodicea (ca. 310–390), for instance, the author quotes Papias of Hierapolis (ca. 60–130) who describes Judas and his death:

Judas did not die by hanging, but he survived after being taken down, before he had choked to death. The Acts of the Apostles signifies this as well: “Falling headfirst he burst forth in the middle, and his intestines spilled out.” And Papias, the disciple of John, relates this very clearly in the fourth book of his *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*:

“But Judas went about in this world as a great model of impiety. He became so bloated in the flesh that he could not pass through a place that was easily wide enough for a wagon – not even his swollen head could fit. They say that his eyelids swelled to such an extent that he could not see the light at all; and a doctor could not see his eyes even with an optical device, so deeply sunken they were in the surrounding flesh. And his genitals became more disgusting and larger than anyone’s; simply by relieving himself, to his wanton shame, he emitted pus and worms that flowed through his entire body.

And they say that after he suffered numerous torments and punishments, he died on his own land, and that land has been, until now, desolate and uninhabited because of the stench. Indeed, even to this day no one can pass by the place without holding his nose. This was how great an outpouring he made from his flesh on the ground.”¹

The inclination to describe corruption in terms of degenerating bodies is especially evident in monastic literature. Discourses on virginity negotiated the relationship between purity in the flesh and decay. Gregory of Nyssa’s *On Virginity*, for instance, shows virginal purity to serve the forces opposite of death and corruption. According to the fifth-century *Life of St. Syncletica*, the desert mother Syncletica taught the other ascetics to deal with their sexual desires thus:

If a vision of seemingly appearance should come into being in the regions of thought, which reasonably in this case one must punish, erase the eyes of the image, and extract flesh from the cheeks; cut away under the lips, and further imagine the ugly coagulated state of bare bone. [...] It is necessary on the whole to represent the body of the desired one as a wound that smells oppressive, and is inclined to putrefy, briefly put, as resembling a corpse, or to imagine oneself as a corpse.²

The text points to the ugliness of decay. For Syncletica putrefaction represents the opposite of sexual pleasure. She is trying to imagine herself as a corpse, attempting to see herself and the body of the one she desires as ugly and transformed. In this way the ascetic can escape other forces in the self. Decomposition helps her; a dying body remedies desire.

The life of Theodore of Sykeon (d. 613) relates how the saint’s family goes to search for the son who is lost to extreme asceticism in the desert. They set off with happy expectations, but when they finally find him in his cave, he is a living dead:

With joy they went to the mountain and brought Theodore out looking like a corpse. [...] When he came into the air he fainted and did not speak for a long time. His head was covered with sores and pus, his hair was matted and an indescribable number of worms were lodged in it; his bones were all but through the flesh and the stench was such that no one could stand to be near him.³

The scene is clearly meant to shock the reader, as much as it horrifies the family. The goo of death sticks to his body. In their struggles, the ascetic heroes are capable of enduring the forces of the underworld; they battle Thanatos with their bare hands. They are tested, but prove to be stronger than death itself, on account of their incorruptibility. They reside in tombs or watch their own bodies decay.⁴ This theme of mortification, and being alive in death, runs as a vital thread through the textual tradition of the ascetic movement. Dissolving bodies indicate the horrible forces of death and decay at work.

Lazarus and liturgy

The liturgical writers had different concerns than ascetic writers. Their texts, too, usually had a didactic aim – in a broad sense – but they would write for another kind of audience in a dissimilar context. Those texts transmitted to us typically address audiences of lay city dwellers in a festive mood; the songs and sermons were performed at (semi-)liturgical events during or in anticipation of important holidays.⁵ Naturally, most people in an average late ancient congregation were not inclined to go into caves and graves and stay there.⁶ Rather than sacred avant-garde heroes, the liturgical authors presented characters who were supposed to relate much closer to the congregated audience, as figures of identification – or perhaps the opposite. In hymns, the Samaritan woman from John 4.4–26 could function as an exemplar of faith, Judas Iscariot as a token of vices not to be imitated by the believers.⁷ These models were less inclined to engage in ascetic struggles comparable to that of Theodore or Syncletica. Liturgical authors worked zealously to make their texts into stories about their audiences.⁸

Holy Week, or ἡ μεγάλη ἐβδομάς as the Byzantines called it, constitutes an ancient part of the Christian ritual in the East. Already in the pre-Nicene period its days had been fixed to the narrative progression of the Gospel stories and Christ's final days before the crucifixion.⁹ The fourth-century pilgrim Egeria describes in her letter from the Holy Land how the congregation assembled in Bethany on the Saturday that precedes Palm Sunday. They went to the Lazarium and to a smaller church located at the spot where Lazarus' sister Martha met Christ.¹⁰ The feastday, which later came to be called Lazarus Saturday in the Byzantine rite, was also observed in Constantinople at an early date.¹¹ It is a threshold day; with it Lent terminates and Holy Week commences. During the Liturgy, the deacon would read the Gospel story from John 11.1–45.¹² According to the Gospel, Martha and Mary from Bethany told Christ that their brother had died, and when Christ arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. As the mourning sister Martha pointed out,

“by this time there is a stench” (John 11.39). Nonetheless, Jesus was able to raise him from the dead.

In the world of late ancient liturgy, biblical figures functioned as models; similarly they could typify a certain kind of personality, a certain way of life, or a certain kind of fate. The figure of Lazarus became associated with Christian death. The link between him and corpses, in fact, ran so deep that eventually the very activity of shrouding someone for the grave was described by the verb *λαζαρόω*, and the swathing bands that the Byzantines shrouded the deceased in came to be called *λαζάρωμα*.¹³ This phenomenon exists in other languages too; a place where the ill or dying are treated may be called a *lazaretto*, a *lazaret*, or a *lazar house* in English. Lazarus was, in other words, not just any person from the Bible who died. He epitomized Christian death – and reinvigoration.

The grotesque and the monstrous

Although the *grotesque* as a refined artistic language may have appeared with modernity and the emergence of modern art, its subversive forms have deep cultural-historical roots.¹⁴ The grotesque may be detected in Euripides’ tragedy *The Bacchae* as well as in Aristophanes’ comedy *The Birds*.¹⁵ It is often assumed, however, that while the medieval west featured grotesque and carnivalesque bodies and monstrous scenes, the Byzantines preferred to engage in more sober acts of contemplation, in serene meditations on their own mortality.¹⁶ But, as we shall see, liturgical authors of the early Byzantine period would project images of corporeal transmutation and bizarre scenes of overconsumption and vomiting. In their compositions emerges, I argue, what we in our twenty-first-century idiom would call the grotesque: the ambivalent intersection between the ridiculous and the terrifying, the uncanny and deformed.¹⁷ In the middle of human tidiness erupt disturbing displays, which we still have to look at because somewhere deep down we know that in all its strangeness, the horror is really about ourselves.

Grotesques often present metamorphoses and hybrids, and they tend to deform figures, accentuating processes that open up bodies to transformation, such as eating and vomiting, penetration, birth-giving and decay. “An aesthetic of eliding difference,” the grotesque in art has been called.¹⁸ It usually shows up in border regions, between realms and worlds. Monstrous forms are likely to appear. Similar things can, in fact, be said of monsters themselves: by their hybrid figures and resistance towards the conventional categories of human culture they disturb the very culture and categories from which they emerge.¹⁹

Franz Kafka’s character exemplifies the grotesque in modern literature quite well:

[Gregor Samsa fand] sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt. Er lag auf seinem panzerartig harten Rücken und sah, wenn er den Kopf ein wenig hob, seinen gewölbten, braunen, von bogenförmigen Versteifungen geteilten Bauch, auf dessen Höhe sich die Bettdecke, zum gänzlichen Niedergleiten bereit, kaum

noch erhalten konnte. Seine vielen, im Vergleich zu seinem sonstigen Umfang kläglich dünnen Beine flimmerten ihm hilflos vor den Augen.²⁰

Samsa looks at himself and sees a hybrid, a monster, a body transformed. The scene appears uncomfortably realistic, yet there is also an element of bizarre humour in it.²¹ The grotesque finds its place in spaces where laughter meets horror; it induces a mixture of sympathy and disgust in the beholder. With its ability to ridicule, the grotesque is also closely related to satire.

What is it about such tableaux that pleases the reader? What is the point? At least since the nineteenth century, theorists have attempted to make sense of the grotesque. It is a general trait of the grotesque, however, to escape definitions. Wolfgang Kayser thought that the grotesque ultimately served to “invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world.”²² Such a view reduces a complex phenomenon into a simple – albeit paradoxical – strategy, and cannot really bear its whole weight on its shoulder. As David Williams has pointed out, “the function of the monstrous and the deformed is, however, not merely to parody the affirmative.”²³ Nonetheless, Kayser points to one central function of the Christian grotesque: to summon and to subjugate at the same time. When a culture projects its monsters, it incarnates its own inversions.²⁴

Inherent to the appeal of the grotesque is its *realism*, its resonance with certain aspect of human experience. I do not mean to oppose “realism” to the monstrous, but to a phantasmal or abstract reading of the grotesque and its monsters.²⁵ The monsters are not simply completely opposite, they issue from human experience, and as such they do not represent the demonic other in crystallized form. They seek to articulate the abyss of irrationality which underlies the membrane of our human existence, but they do so in a human language that forms part of the same membrane. As Dana Oswald has put it, “the monstrous body is a body that is always already present. Its existence precedes the humans who seek it out.”²⁶ In other words, the monsters resemble the culture from which they proceed, and cannot be construed as entirely other.

The devout Catholic author Flannery O’Connor once remarked: “My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eye for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable.”²⁷ O’Connor’s twentieth-century perspective need not only fit “these times”; as Rodney Stark has observed, late ancients might live “with a trench running down the middle of the road, in which you could find dead bodies decomposing.”²⁸ In Greco-Roman cities, “human corpses – adult as well as infant – were sometimes just pushed into the street and abandoned.”²⁹ The grotesque in literature and art ultimately speaks to the fluctuating deformity of embodied human life. To stage the grotesque, then, involves letting loose fears and anxieties, animosities and deficiencies.

Lazarus taken asunder

Basil of Seleucia was archbishop in the city which preceded modern-day Silifke on the Southern coast of Turkey. He lived in the fifth century and seems to have died sometime in the 460's, but we know relatively little about him. In his preaching on Lazarus, Basil retells the story, which we must assume his congregation has already heard, and uses the occasion to highlight those aspects that he finds important. He says:

[Lazarus] appeared among the living, he whose inward parts were ravaged, and who was given up to worms, an object of waste. His eyes were putrid, his sinews were torn asunder, his shoulders and hands were separated, his bones were disjoined, his nerves and marrows and veins were dissolved to juices. In sum, the earth had taken back its own contribution; the body had been torn apart so utterly, while the soul had been numbered among the ranks of souls.³⁰

Basil is relatively matter-of-fact about the whole process, but the dispassionate style should not distract us from the gravity of his display: Lazarus' flesh is eaten by worms and the innards are rotting, decay tears the eyes apart and the tendons lose their grip. Body parts turn into juice.

The homilist does not portray a body punished for its sins or tormented in hell. He presents striking, almost hyper-realistic images of natural processes – scary processes. Yet, why does Basil go into such macabre details? He obviously wants to show his congregation that Lazarus was indeed completely dead, but what could be the effect of painting it so graphically that the listener cannot escape images of death worms in his or her mind?

In the Byzantine world, as in any premodern society, death was almost omnipresent, and it was persistently escaping control. People died from minor diseases and only half the children lived to be five years old.³¹ Although ecclesiastical authors would encourage their congregations not to grieve for the dead and not to be scared of dying, we know that death caused fear and tears. When the monastic author John Climacus in the seventh century taught the monks to meditate on their own death, he said that "fear of death is a natural instinct that comes from disobedience."³² In other words, fear of death is as natural as death itself. It came with Adam and Eve, who disobey God's command and became mortal – and started to fear death. In late antiquity, most people were convinced that there was an afterlife. Nonetheless, death frightened the sick and the dying, and it left the loved ones in sorrow and despair. Basil's scenario here cannot have comforted those who were ailing.

Christians tended to think of the separation of soul and body as a violent process, and its completion marked the full death of the corpse.³³ It was a general view, although not universally accepted, that it took the soul and body three days to divorce. Death represented a birth from the grave, and just like the face of a child was *formed* in three days in the *womb*, according to a common view, the face was *deformed* in as many days in the *tomb*.³⁴ Lazarus was in other words entirely dead and

formless before he was resurrected. His face was dehumanized. In the quoted passage, the author creates a scene where the body-and-soul components are scattered and dispersed, and these dissolved entities of human life threaten to hurl the living Christian subject to the border of abjection, where the shadows of self reside.³⁵

Hesychius of Jerusalem was an older contemporary of Basil. He served as a presbyter in Jerusalem and was a popular preacher. Apart from his works, we know as little about him as we do about Basil. There are two homilies on Lazarus transmitted under his name. In the second he describes, much like Basil, how Lazarus has undergone the process of decomposition and his body is completely disintegrated:

on the fourth day [he] has rotten away in the tomb, and much of his entrails has been ravaged by worms, and the whole structure of his body is torn asunder, and the stench that filled the tomb was a witness to the decay.³⁶

Foul odour indicates bodily decomposition. Late ancient Christians were better trained than modern people, perhaps, to read olfactory signals,³⁷ and the liturgical authors writing about Lazarus took an important cue from the stench that Martha mentions in the Gospel. Pseudo-Macarius actually says that Lazarus “exuded so fetid an odor that no one could approach his tomb.”³⁸ The same can be said about the iconographers, who, since the sixth century at least, portrayed Lazarus’ swathed corpse surrounded by onlookers who hide their noses.³⁹ The insistence upon the worms, however, can only be traced in liturgical writing, and here they are relatively persistent, even though the Gospel text does not mention them. Like the stench, worms attest to the process of decomposition, but the worms clearly add a more graphic and grotesque detail. Worms represent the moment in which one body is becoming another body, where human flesh is turning into invertebrate flesh. Mikhail Bakhtin insists: “The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.”⁴⁰ On the fourth day, according to Hesychius, worms and human body occur side by side, or one inside the other, at the verge of becoming the other.

What were the late ancient churchgoers expected to think about this? The display of disintegrating body-parts is not easy to relate to in terms of identification. Yet it induces a pattern of identification similar to what we may see in other forms of grotesque literature, like Kafka’s novella and Samsa’s alien body: The reader is not Samsa, but he or she understands what it is like to be Samsa, and can extend a certain amount of sympathy as well as discomfort. Basil’s and Hesychius’ listeners were not Lazarus, but everyone knew, deep down, that his or her body was going to dissolve someday, and it is this uncomfortable knowledge to which the preachers spoke. They made sure that their audiences did not miss the morbid details of decomposition. Lazarus was a historically particular person, but in the narrative tradition of the Church he functioned as a Christian type. He represented the bodies of those

gathered around Basil and Hesychius in the fifth-century assembly. In this way Lazarus is the people in the audience; the preachers addressed the mortal men and women in their parishes; the laity was to feel his decomposition in their guts. The prospect of eyeballs dissolving is bound to upset anyone with their own pair of oculi. The passage forces the eyes in the audience to see themselves as their own negation. In the homiletic mirror they might see themselves in pieces.

Yet the authors paid as much attention to the reversion of the process as they did to the dissolving. Basil writes:

How were rotting feet made to stand, how were loosened hands rejoined, how were the quenched pupils of the eyes kindled towards the lamps of light, how did sinews stretch themselves out, how did the neck tighten up, how did marrows and veins grow out, how was the half-eaten skin again healthily stretched out tight, and how, as if in a womb, was Lazarus moulded in the tomb?⁴¹

Basil presents these as rhetorical questions; we should not expect to find an answer to them, he implies. What he accomplishes, however, is a visually striking display of a corpse that reintegrates. He teases the imagination of the audience to envision disjointed limbs moving. It is the metamorphic process that gives the invigorating corpse a grotesque hue; a dead body with half-eaten skin and rotting legs fumbles and stumbles and gets back on its feet again. Basil evidently does more than just establish that Lazarus was in fact dead.

Right after Hesychius has displayed how the body is ripped to pieces and eaten in the tomb, he similarly describes how the parts came together again, as the body of Lazarus is rebuilt and recreated:

The limbs found each other in the tomb, the eye came back to its own position, the nose took up its own place, the cheeks hastened to their former shape, the neck was united to shoulders and head, the hands were coupled together to be ready for their movement, the fastening of the joints were realized, the position of fingers was constructed, the structures of the nerves were tied up, nature clothed bones, arteries were stretched out together with veins, marrow was formed anew, membranes woven, hair set in order.⁴²

The description matches what we saw in Basil, but it is tidier in a way, like an anatomical lecture. Yet this passage follows immediately after the description of the decay, and the listener would still have the image of the worms in his or her mind. In other words, the rebuilding scene suggests a grave metamorphic negotiation in the outskirts of human corporeality.

Hesychius' other homily on Lazarus displays a different version of the dissolving body. He engages the relatively common notion of Hades as a prison, and emphasizes the fact that the corpse was shrouded before it was buried, so the limbs cannot move or disperse. Lazarus is trapped. At the outset, the author compares Lazarus to an animal that jumps out of the trap of death, and eventually Lazarus turns into different animals. As the human corpse leaps out to become a human body

it flickers before the listeners' eyes as an animal, on the boundary between this world and the underworld. But as the animal body appears from the grave, Hesychius freezes the image; he pauses to consider the state that Lazarus has been in and still partially is in:

And he leaped out just like a deer from the tomb, as a gazelle out of the grave, the dead one, the blind one, the captive. Still the swathing-bands were wrapped around him [...] membranes covered the eyes, the pupils were devoured and obscured, and they were not able to receive the sunlight under the bindings. His hearing had been reduced, his breathing had been blocked, the tongue had a muzzle and a bridle, the lips had been taken control over with the bindings of those who treated the corpse, the neck and throat had been wrapped up with strips, the shoulders had been bound together with the bands as the thighs had been tied to one another and so did not disperse from each other, the legs were put on top of one another just like a log upon a log.⁴³

Hesychius gives his listeners a claustrophobic nightmare scenario, a vision of being completely tied up, half dead and half alive, trapped in the ground. He leaps, but he cannot move; he cannot move, he cannot hear, he cannot see or speak. And at the same time there is a comic element to this gruesomeness too: the agile legs of a gazelle he contrasts with two heavy logs on top of each other. The elegant movement of the animal he contrasts with the stumbling figure who is still dressed in swathing bands. These two contrasting images dissolve into one another to create grotesque laughter. Who would not feel an ambivalent discomfort about this scenario?

Before leaving the fifth century, let us return briefly to Basil. The last part of his homily consists of a personified Hades' long lament. Through this speech the limits between the worlds vanish. Hades exclaims desperately:

[Hades:] "What is this change in my affairs, what is this unbelievable alliance of nature? The dead are returning to life and the tombs have become wombs of the living. [...] Even the tombs are faithless to me with regard to the dead, and the dead, although putrifying, are leaping out; all in their swathing bands they are dancing, mocking my laugh. Still mourned, they are going up towards those that mourn them."⁴⁴

Rotting corpses are coming out of their tombs dancing – half naked, halfway dressed in their swathing bands. In the border country between life and death, cadavers are dancing. They are born out of the opening bodies of the tombs. Hades' own laugh achieves a grimacing quality. This macabre with the ridiculing bodies has an important theological aspect to it: Pronounced only days before Easter, the words serve the anticipation of Christ's resurrection and the general resurrection of humankind. The story has its theological *telos* in the upcoming celebrations. But Hesychius' and Basil's rotting displays of the mocked Hades and the dancing corpses stand out as vivid grotesques that do more than point ahead. The imagery transcends the mere monastic contemplation of one's own mortality. These scenes induce ambivalent laughter and optimistic unease.

Between monstrous dialogues

A century after Basil and Hesychius, two liturgical authors in Constantinople both revisited Lazarus' decomposition. They gave emphasis to the drama, and integrated the subterranean event into more dramatic scenes. If the fifth century had heard Hades speaking in monologue, the sixth century would hear dialogues. The listener perceived the underworld imagery indirectly, through characters in the stories who watched the grotesque body. These liturgical texts implicate the body of Lazarus in satirical dramas where the monstrous characters of death act out their folly.

Leontius was a sixth-century presbyter of Constantinople. Apart from this, we know nothing about his life either. But his sermons are vivid. On the whole his visions of Lazarus' corpse fall into the same tradition as that of the fifth-century homilists; the description of the dissolving body seems to have become a standard in the homiletic treatment of the Lazarus story. Leontius places the words in Martha's mouth:

[Martha to Jesus]: "You are going to be laughed at; it isn't possible for him to rise. By this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead for four days. His hair has fallen out, his flesh has shrivelled, his veins have become slack, the flesh on his bones has disowned its nature. [...] We are becoming a laughing-stock: worms are grazing, vital juices are becoming stagnant."⁴⁵

In Martha's anxious speech, the fear of mockery and laughter is interwoven with the detailed description of bodily decomposition. She employs this horrible display to convince Jesus that his mission is hopeless. Blood has coagulated in the arteries of her brother's body, and instead of pulsating juices, worms pierce the flesh. The display is, narratively speaking, more complex than we have seen in the other examples, for it takes place among the living. The laughter is only imagined, and so is the rotting of Lazarus. To the listener, however, these features appear no less vivid just because they are imagined. Together with grazing worms, the mocking laugh is penetrating the scene.

In his other homily on the same subject, Leontius describes the opposite movement, when the body parts and the streams of vital juices are reuniting:

When the devil saw [...] that all the creatures of the underworld had been released,
and that the powers of below could not endure it [...] and since immediately Lazarus' hair began to grow again,
and the weakening of the sinews became firm,
and the separated bones were fastened together,
and the streams of the vital juices were gathering together
[etc.]

when the devil saw this and things happening equal to this, struck with terror and in anguish he gave orders to the powers under him.⁴⁶

The Devil has been watching the drama of a reintegrating body, a rotten corpse being pulled together. It played out before his eyes, and he is deeply disturbed and struck with agony. Leontius calls Lazarus “the man whom Tartaros had given up in terror.”⁴⁷ The dissolving and reuniting body must have had a shocking and horrifying effect on its subterranean witnesses, as Leontius saw it. His text attests to the capacity of Lazarus’ corpse to strike terror into its onlookers. At the same time the dissolving itself becomes less dangerous to the listener when its most important function, perhaps, is to scare Martha or the Devil. The bones of Lazarus now serve less to horrify the audience than to frighten and ridicule characters in the narrative, and hence the satirical comes to eclipse the grotesque.

Like Basil’s Hades, Leontius’ Devil complains about his fate, but Leontius turns monologue into dialogue. He stages a conversation between the Devil and the powers of the underworld, where the latter seem to have lost their faith in the Devil, and the Devil himself weeps over his misfortune:

[the Devil:] “Don’t prefer him [i.e. Christ] before my sovereignty. [...] I have fallen into a great disaster. I have begun to vomit the people I devoured.”⁴⁸

Martha did not really know what she was saying, but she feared that people would make fun of her, and yet eventually she ended up ridiculing herself. Leontius makes sure that the Devil becomes an even more ridiculous character, a real laughing-stock. While not ignoring the decomposition of Lazarus’ body itself, the sixth-century writers turned their attention towards the monstrous forces of death and how the body of Hades opened up and dissolved.

We see this even clearer in another writer from the period, namely Romanos the Melodist (ca. 490–560). He was a liturgical poet and the most outstanding writer of the Constantinopolitan hymn genre called *kontakion*. Although they were songs with refrains, these hymns had much in common with the dramatic homilies of the day. Romanos was a writer who in one of his hymns for the Christmas festival gave vivid descriptions of how Herod’s soldiers chopped the head off of nursing babies so that their heads were left dangling by the teeth from the nipples.⁴⁹ Romanos also wrote two kontakia about the raising of Lazarus. In these texts, as Georgia Frank has noted, “Hades feels Christ’s effects in his gut, literally.”⁵⁰ The pre-Christian battle between hero and monster is being played out between Christ and Hades.⁵¹

Romanos’ dialogue creates a gloomy and yet bizarre atmosphere. He revels in the monstrous. As grotesque or abnormal bodies monsters defy borders; they represent challenges to human hierarchies, and they inhabit spaces which contest the order of human culture.⁵² In this way he creates a world in which – at least for a little while – the listeners have nothing to hold on to, nothing to navigate by. On the edges of the underworld, between up and down, Romanos’ Hades discusses with Thanatos. In the first hymn *On the Raising of Lazarus*, the listener meets Hades. He says that he feels the feet of Jesus trampling on his head. This immediately makes him worry, and he whines and cries and complains. Is he sick? What’s wrong? Hades has been

transformed from a terrifying monster into a terrified monster. Romanos sketches him as a preposterous character; there is something involuntarily funny about him. In fact, Hades and Thanatos both eventually have to conclude that “those in the earth will laugh at us!”⁵³

But first Hades is really full, and he screams to Thanatos:

[Hades:]

– Do not bring me food, for I cannot digest it;
you put wrapped corpses in front of me, and as soon as I gulp them down I vomit;
I cheer and grab them when they are buried, but I cannot hold them when they are rotting.⁵⁴

Romanos casts Hades as an obese overeater, which means that he gulps down whatever he sees, a typical trait of the grotesque body. For Bakhtin, the most grotesque part of the body is precisely the mouth: “It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss.”⁵⁵ Thanatos serves this abyss (Hades) as a waiter who brings him corpses like rolls to eat. The listener is not staring into the reality of decaying human flesh so much as into the monstrous and yet pathetic orgy in the underworld. Hades’ own greed has turned him into a puking monster, which is exactly what happened to the Devil in Leontius. Thanatos is annoyed, and he gnashes his teeth. He replies angrily:

[Thanatos:]

– Discuss that with your belly, which until now you have not stuffed entirely to the brim!

I have worn myself out bringing you food, and you never said “I’m full!”
No, you became stretched out like the sea, consuming rivers of dead
and never did you reach satiety.⁵⁶

The life of mortals has always seemed like water to you;
you have gaped and never stopped gulping them down;
let it be enough now, so you don’t multiply yourself!
The feet whose sound you hear, I think, belong to someone threatening,
[...]

[who will be] searching through your bowels.
Yes, he has come to purge you,
and you really need that, for you have swollen up!
So it should be a relief to you if Lazarus
is poured out from you entrails.⁵⁷

Hades sickens Thanatos – and the listener – as he gulps down streams of rotten bodies. Romanos’ all-devouring Hades has definitely been reduced to a talking abyss, a belly with a mouth on it. Yet his consumption eventually impairs him. So much so that Thanatos suggests Hades actually might need Christ’s physical

intervention.⁵⁸ The mocking that was only indicated in Leontius, becomes full-blown in Romanos' version. Thanatos is making fun of this monster.

After the dispute, Romanos turns the listener's attention to the inside of Hades. And Hades himself sees with his own eyes what is happening to Lazarus' corpse, which he has recently eaten, the fragmented limbs within him. The different body-parts appear as separate subjects that move around inside Hades' belly. As all the putrefying remains of the corpse are starting to reassemble, Hades exclaims:

[Hades:]

– I see the limbs of Lazarus, those that corruption dissolved,
they are waiting to rise up; they are preparing mobilization,
for they creep like ants now after the worms withdrew
and the stench retreated.⁵⁹

This striking imagery involves loose limbs, bugs, and military action – a deadly fight between the ant-team and the worm-team. And this all happens inside the monster-belly. The sensation resembles that of a person trapped naked in an ant hill waiting for the insects to attack. Romanos shows the moment right after the worms of death have withdrawn and the odour has vanished. Like an army of ants, the body parts have started crawling; they are rehearsing, ready to move. The grotesque exhibition has a striking visual quality to it.

Like Kafka, Romanos effectively combines insect bodies with human bodies to create a feeling of discomfort. He paints a graphic yet comic scene that the listener gets to watch together with Hades. Hades stares, not at his own body, but at the loose limbs moving around within his body. For Hades the gastric drama indicates that he is losing control over his own limbs; what is occurring inside him means he will not be in command of his own stomach. The whole panorama is, perhaps, not exactly disgusting, but it is utterly weird and strange. The scene is less repulsive since it is the monster that loses control rather than a human being. On the other hand, the listener who hears the story being sung, gets to peek inside the monster's body together with the monster himself. He or she is allowed to gaze at a dissolved human body in the monster's belly. This co-viewing opens up for strange and uncomfortable identification alliances.

The modern artist Carlee Fernandez has created works where parts of animals overlap with other things or bodies. For instance her boar's head in a satchel shows the head of a boar hanging in straps as if the loose body-part were a bag. This is a kind of grotesque that borders on the nonsensical. Frances Connelly writes about this exact work in her book *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture* and says: "It is impossible to hold a single response to this monster: it is absurdly funny, physically repulsive, mortally true."⁶⁰ I would suggest that the congregation's responses to Romanos' *human-ant-body-within-monster-stomach* might be similar.

To Hades, however, the scene is not funny at all. It is shocking. He exclaims to Thanatos:

[Hades:]

– Oh my! Jesus has really come – the one who hurled the stench against us
has made the stinker [i.e. Lazarus] fragrant,
and now the rotted and ashen
will rise up and stand
saying “You are life and resurrection.” (XIV 12.8–11)

When Thanatos heard these things he screamed,
then he ran, grabbing Hades by the hand,
and together they witness marvels, horrors (τεράστια, φοικτά):
the odour of the Son of God sewed through his friend [Lazarus],
stitching up the body for the calling of the Life-giver,
arranging the hairs, and weaving the membranes,
and putting together the viscera for him,
stretching out every vein, letting blood flow again,
and joining together the arteries,
so that Lazarus, ready when he is called,
will rise up and stand
saying “You are life and resurrection.” (XIV 13.1–11)

Romanos introduces a new set of abnormal images: Christ’s odour runs through the body parts like a thread sewing Lazarus back together. The monstrous characters of the underworld stand hand in hand, scared to death by the scene in front of them. First Hades cries out, and then Thanatos. Uncanny and frightening is the vision played out before their eyes. They who themselves are supposed to be uncanny and frightening have turned into a parody. Life is frightening; death is frightened. Romanos casts Hades and Thanatos in a mould of folly. The forces of death are completely deprived of their assumed power, and eventually the corpse – like an army of limbs – can defeat the monsters.

Yet if the role of the monster is, as has been suggested, to police “the borders of the possible,”⁶¹ the defrocking of the beast means to create a state of uncertainty. With the Lazarus story, as Romanos projects it, the gates towards the impossible are opened as these figurations of human horror transform into horrified figures.

From the zombie point of view

Andrew of Crete (ca. 660–ca. 740) was an enormously influential liturgical author and among the most outstanding writers of another Byzantine hymn form, namely the *kanon*. He eventually became metropolitan of Gortyna on Crete. His *kanon On the Raising of Lazarus* is still in use in the Byzantine rite of today.

Andrew is moderate compared to Romanos – or Basil for that matter. His hymn refers to the stench and to the grave shroud that Lazarus is still wrapped in, but it avoids the details of decomposition. Instead Andrew draws imagery from the

creation story in Genesis, and he imagines the raising of Lazarus to be a new creation in which God blows breath into man once more.

While Andrew does not present the same grotesque intensity as the earlier authors, he intensifies his account in a different way: From ode 6, he lets Lazarus himself speak. This allows for a new kind of identification, and a closer kind of identification between the congregation and the corpse. When Andrew's *kanon* was performed, the churchgoers sang the voice of these bones in Hades. Their first-person perspectives overlapped vocally in the moment when the hymn was sung. Lazarus says to Christ:

[Lazarus:] "You breathed life into the breathless shape of my flesh, Saviour; you bound it tight with bones and sinews, and you raised me from the dead by your command. You cleft open the all-devouring belly of Hades and snatched me out."⁶²

Here, admittedly, Lazarus recounts what has already happened, so it is not really a corpse, but a living body, who tells the story. Nonetheless we get the first-person perspective: Lazarus himself has experienced the reshaping of his own physique, as an eyewitness – or rather a body-witness. He appears as an observer of his own corporeal self and of the process through which his own corpse transformed.

The poet goes on to develop the interval of time between Lazarus' coming to life and his physical escape from the tomb. First, the voice of Christ awakens the dead corpse, but he is still bound in chains and cannot move. He is waiting inside Hades. In this state, where he is neither dead nor alive, Lazarus starts to cry and sing God's praise, down in the underworld. He shouts and prays:

[Lazarus:] "I may be wrapped in bonds, Saviour," Lazarus cried from below, "but I shall not remain forever, Deliverer, in the belly of Hades – if you would only call out to me 'Lazarus, come out!'"⁶³

Again the voice of the congregation represents the voice of Lazarus, but this time he is the half-dead man in Hades, the man who looks at his own bound self. Andrew casts his character, and by extension his congregation, as a human figure caught in the ghastly state between death and life. People in the assembly amount to living dead, or corpses crying to their Saviour. Andrew shows what people today might call a *zombie* – one of "us" caught somewhere between life and death.⁶⁴

Andrew also describes the mocking of Hades and lets Hades complain to Thanatos that his belly has been cut open and the corpses are fleeing.⁶⁵ But more unusual is the verbal interaction between Hades and the zombie. The former speaks to Lazarus. As the corpse cries to Christ, all of a sudden Hades starts to address him – to *implore* him. Hades grumbles nervously, with a desperate tone:

[Hades:] "I beg you, Lazarus," he said, "rise up, go straight through my bars and be gone. It is better for me to lament bitterly for the loss of one, than for all the ones I swallowed in my hunger. Why do you hesitate, Lazarus?"⁶⁶

With these pathetic words Hades completely ridicules himself. Andrew has degraded Hades to the point where he has to beg his own zombie, his own food, to leave. He turns into a silly and pitiful inversion of himself. Lazarus, of course, eventually escapes and is no longer a zombie as he returns to life as a totally reinvigorated human being.

A moment of vertigo

In the Easter night of contemporary Greek Orthodox practice, when the choir sings hymns about Christ's victory over the laws of fallen nature, the huge chandelier in the nave – which lights up the room during the dark hour – is often pulled to the side and let go, so that it starts swinging back and forth, creating the impression that the whole room is moving, bursting and shaking, aflame with lights. The faithful standing on the floor feel themselves swinging around in the dizzy space. On this the holiest of nights – as Christ is confronting the boundaries of Hades and destabilizing (at least for a short while) everything that we know to be true – lamps cry *vertigo*.

Whether or not Byzantines had a similar practice is beside the point here; the dancing lights illustrate, however, the existential quakes and quivers of Easter, which formed a part of the Byzantine understanding of the feast too. Lazarus Saturday, with its grotesque texts of a moving corpse, points ahead towards this God's death and resurrection. Already a week in advance, flesh is shaken, and the categories are subverted as monstrosities start to appear.

The monster theorist Asa Simon Mittman has suggested that

the monstrous is that which creates [a] sense of *vertigo*, that which calls into question our (their, anyone's) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us (often with fangs at our throats, with its fire upon our skin, even as we and our stand-ins and body doubles descend the gullet) to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization.⁶⁷

The ritual texts about Lazarus from Greek late antiquity induce a sense of vertigo, an atmosphere in which looking down at one's own corporeal self becomes a nauseating experience: bodies are opening and human shapes turn into animal forms – transforming and deforming; half-dead corpses dance and cry; monsters vomit and devils wail; satire befalls with the echo of laughter; the dead are among us, and the monstrous land below is alive. A week before Christ's resurrection parishioners were decomposing and dissolving. The believers were to enter Holy Week with a sense of existential vertigo, as the beast is let out of the bag.

Early Christianity lived well with the grotesque. The liturgical writers of the period marshalled a rich arsenal of literary and rhetorical techniques that made them capable of shaking the sense of existential stability among their audiences, and they used it most effectively during the climax of the Christian calendar in which the living did not only amount to mortal bodies, but mortal bodies who at the same time “came out of the tombs” (Matt. 27.52–53).

The textual passages treated here distinguish themselves from Kafka's text by the fact that they constitute mere fragments of longer stories; while Samsa stays a bug throughout and eventually dies, Lazarus comes to life again. His is an almost continuous metamorphosis – through Hades, bellies and uncomfortable metaphors. Drawing and keeping the audience's attention was, no doubt, one effect of the grotesque and the monstrous. Yet there was more going on. What the liturgical authors achieved was a *momentary* debasement of selves. In a cathartic movement the people in the audience went down into the gore with Lazarus, into the shadows of their own mortality. In the instance of his abjection, the congregation is abjectified along with him. Like Lazarus, however, the churchgoers eventually resurrect from their own grotesque selves.

Notes

¹ Papias, fragment 4. Trans. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 105–107. For a recent treatment of the corporeal aspects of Papias' fragment, see Solevåg, "Monsteret Judas."

² Ps-Athanasius, *Life of St. Syncletica*, 29.

³ *Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon*, 20.

⁴ E.g. Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony* 8; Antonius, *Life of St. Simeon the Stylite* 17–18.

⁵ The details of liturgical performances in late antiquity are not known to us, but for surveys about the homilies, see Cunningham and Allen, *Preacher and Audience* (esp. the introduction); for the kontakion, see Lingas, "The Liturgical Place," and Arentzen, *The Virgin in Song*, 10–32.

⁶ This is probably true of those who heard the *Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon*, too; not all texts about ascetics were written for a monastic audience.

⁷ Examples are Romanos, *On the Woman of Samaria* and *On Judas*.

⁸ Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects*; id., "Christian Piety and Practice," 291–297; Lieber, "Rhetoric of Participation"; Hunger, "Romanos Melodos, Dichter"; Arentzen, "Voices Interwoven."

⁹ For an introduction, see Johnson, "Preparation for Pascha?"

¹⁰ Egeria, *Travels* 5.1.

¹¹ Talley, *The Origins*, 186–7.

¹² At least that became the lection later, in the period for which we have direct sources; Mateos, *Typicon de la Grande Église* II, 64. It is likely that the typicon reflect an earlier tradition, although the fifth-century Jerusalem lectionary does not prescribe it; see Renoux, "Le Codex Arménien 121," 254–257.

¹³ *Lexikon zur byzantinischen Gräzität*, s.v.v. λαζαρόω; λαζάρωμα.

¹⁴ Connelly, *Grotesque in Western Art*, 16–17.

¹⁵ Melchinger, "The Bacchae"; Habib, "Empire and the Grotesque."

¹⁶ Constan, "Death and Dying," 144.

¹⁷ See also Constantinou, "Grotesque Bodies."

¹⁸ Paulson, *Representations of Revolution*, 7.

¹⁹ Cohen, "Monster Culture," 6–7; for the convergence of monsters and the grotesque, see Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, 109; for corpses, the uncanny and abjection, see also Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3–4.

²⁰ Kafka, *Die Verwandlung*, 5.

²¹ For a reading of this novella as grotesque, consult, e.g., Evans "Aspects of the Grotesque"; Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 90–91.

²² Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art*, 188.

²³ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, 60.

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- ²⁴ For the notion that “the monster’s body is a cultural body,” see Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 4.
- ²⁵ Williams, *Deformed Discourse* distinguishes between *literal* and *symbolic* monsters in the discourse of the Middle Ages (see p. 11).
- ²⁶ Oswald, *Monsters, Gender*, 14.
- ²⁷ O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 33.
- ²⁸ Aquilina, “A Double Take,” 47.
- ²⁹ Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 154.
- ³⁰ Basil, *On Lazarus* 9. Trans. Cunningham, “Basil of Seleucia’s Homily,” 181–182 (with adjustments).
- ³¹ Dennis, “Death in Byzantium,” 3.
- ³² John Climacus, *The Ladder* 6.3. Trans. Moore, *St. John: The Ladder*, 35.
- ³³ Conostas, “Death and Dying,” 125; cf. Conostas, “To Sleep, Perchance.” Basil does not dualistically attempt to rid the Christian soul of the body, for the standard Christians view was that all the fragments and parts of a person would dissolve at death, but reassemble in the resurrection.
- ³⁴ Conostas, “To Sleep, Perchance,” 104.
- ³⁵ Cf. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3–4.
- ³⁶ Hesychius, *Homily XII (On Lazarus II)* 2. Trans. from Barkhuizen, “Reconstruction and Reanimation,” 114 (with adjustments).
- ³⁷ See Harvey, *Scenting Salvation*, esp. 217–218, regarding Lazarus and stench.
- ³⁸ Ps-Macarius, *Homily* 30.8; trans. Maloney, *Pseudo-Macarius*, 193.
- ³⁹ According to Robert Taft and Annemarie Weyl Carr, the sixth-century Rossano Gospels (folio 1r) is the first known example of the Lazarus iconography in which onlookers hold their nose. The earlier iconography featured Christ raising Lazarus with a wand. Taft and Carr, “Lazarus Saturday.”
- ⁴⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.
- ⁴¹ Basil, *On Lazarus* 10. Cunningham, “Basil of Seleucia’s Homily,” 182 (with adjustments).
- ⁴² Hesychius, *On Lazarus II* 3. Barkhuizen, “Reconstruction and Reanimation,” 116 (with adjustments).
- ⁴³ Hesychius, *Homily XI (On Lazarus I)* 11. My trans.
- ⁴⁴ Basil, *On Lazarus* 12. Cunningham, “Basil of Seleucia’s Homily,” 183 (with adjustments).
- ⁴⁵ Leontius, *Homily II: On Palm Sunday* 330–335. Trans. Allen and Datema, *Fourteen Homilies*, 49.
- ⁴⁶ Leontius, *Homily III: On Palm Sunday* 266–280. Allen and Datema, *Fourteen Homilies*, 58 (with adjustments).
- ⁴⁷ Leontius, *Homily II* 393–394. Allen and Datema, *Fourteen Homilies*, 50 (with adjustments).
- ⁴⁸ Leontius, *Homily III* 280–284. Allen and Datema, *Fourteen Homilies*, 58.
- ⁴⁹ Romanos, *On the Innocents* 14.
- ⁵⁰ Frank, “Christ’s Descent,” 222; cf. also Maisano, “Romanos’s Use,” 263.
- ⁵¹ For an introduction to the ancient Greek and Roman monsters, see Felton, “Rejecting and Embracing.”
- ⁵² Cohen, “Monster Culture,” 6–7. For other ancient visions of grotesqueries in the underworld, see Czachesz, *Grotesque Body*, 9–55.
- ⁵³ Romanos, *On the Raising of Lazarus I* 14.7.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 9.3–5. Jesus, Romanos says, rules “over earthlings like lowly locusts” (8.3).
- ⁵⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.
- ⁵⁶ Romanos, *Lazarus I* 10.4–7.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 11.1–3.
- ⁵⁸ For the point that Christ is described as a physician performing surgery, see Rodgers, “Romanos Melodos,” 824.
- ⁵⁹ Romanos, *Lazarus I* 12.4–7.
- ⁶⁰ Connelly, *Grotesque in Western Art*, 8.

⁶¹ Cohen, "Monster Culture," 12–16.

⁶² Andrew, *Kanon on Lazarus* 6.4–5 (*Triōdion*, 586). Trans. *Lenten Triodion*, 472 (with adjustments).

⁶³ Andrew, *Lazarus* 7.3 (*Triōdion*, 587). *Lenten Triodion*, 472 (with adjustments).

⁶⁴ I am not referring here to the Haitian zombie tradition, but rather to the living dead of modern popular culture which has been widely theorized in recent decades; as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out about this figure, "a zombie par excellence is always someone whom we knew before"; it is always eventually ourselves or our neighbours or relatives; Žižek, "Discipline," 100. For one recent scholarly treatment of the modern zombie, see Christie and Lauro, *Better Off Dead*.

⁶⁵ Andrew, *Lazarus* 3.5 (*Triōdion*, 584).

⁶⁶ Andrew, *Lazarus* 7.4–5 (*Triōdion*, 587). *Lenten Triodion*, 472 (with adjustments).

⁶⁷ Mittman, "Introduction," 8 [my italics].

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