**Casts, Imprints and the Deathliness of Things: Artefacts at the Edge[[1]](#endnote-1)**

This essay is dedicated to the staff and students in Art History and Archaeology at the University of Ioannina, Greece, in admiration for their determined commitment to intellectual inquiry in difficult times.

Introduction

“The last words I heard him say were: ‘I want to sleep a little longer. Come back in an hour or so’”. About 9.30, Sister Veritas returned to his room and noticed that his breathing had become shallower. “Suddenly between 9.45 and 9.50 AM, the moment came when he no longer took a breath. It was like a candle going out….” Sister Veritas and Havel’s wife, Dagmar, took turns sitting with him until the next morning. A death mask was arranged, and then his body was put in a modest wooden coffin and driven to Prague, where it was placed in a church in Prague’s Old Town … . thousands filed by, over two days and two nights, to pay their respects. There was not a whiff of officialdom or high ceremony about this part of the leave-taking. …. All that changed on Wednesday morning, when the casket was transferred to a hearse and slowly driven through the bitterly cold streets followed first by [the relatives] then by tens of thousands. [[2]](#endnote-2)

This account of the death in 2011 of Václav Havel is a classic itinerary of the passage from life to death and the social and religious practices that, albeit here on a grand scale, mark the transition through time of the corpse from visibility to invisibility. The death mask, taken in private on the death bed, precedes the time-honoured public rituals that not only ensure disposal of decaying matter but also topographically emphasise the integrity of bodily boundaries separating the living from the decomposing corpse; the subsequent wake that followed the vigil and the funeral comprised a rock concert ostensibly celebrating the life of the deceased but also, of course, a reminder to the mourners that they were still alive. [[3]](#endnote-3) Funeral rites, it has been observed, first and foremost, ‘serve to separate the image of the deceased from the corpse to which it remains bound at the moment of demise.’ [[4]](#endnote-4)

Death masks (fig 1) enter art historical discourse rarely and in very specific ways. [[5]](#endnote-5) Despite the universally recognised mismatch between the face after death and the living face that memorialists seek to commemorate, sculptors from the eighteenth century on have regularly used death masks to assist them. They are therefore of interest to historians of sculpture and those concerned with issues of authenticity within the history of portraiture. They have attracted attention among historians of artefacts associated with the cults of death and burial, forensic archaeologists and historians of medicine.[[6]](#endnote-6) They have been objects of scrutiny on account of their indexicality – the immediacy of their contact with the body they re-present – firstly within discussions of photography and secondly in the study of imprints and of the relationship between art and artisanship. However, by and large the death masks themselves languish unexamined in museum stores: fragile objects that challenge cataloguers, interpreters, and conservators alike, they fit awkwardly with portraits that celebrate life and uncomfortably remind us of an era when human beings were classified by appearance. [[7]](#endnote-7)

The diaspora of material culture studies from archaeology and anthropology through disciplinary configurations of the humanities in recent years has not swept up death masks in its momentum even though the so-called arts of death are currently much discussed.[[8]](#endnote-8) “Thing”, a word that used to be not only innocuous but also frowned upon in serious debate for its lack of precision, is now everywhere. Art historians have long dealt in “things” - the materials of works of art have been part of what they studied. But in literary and historical studies the “material turn” has brought to the fore a wealth of evidence that formerly, if not disregarded, was seen as second rank to events and documents that recorded them.[[9]](#endnote-9) For art historians, “things” that did not qualify as works of art and could not be accommodated into well-established categories were left to anthropologists or museum curators. All that has changed and the idea of a supramaterial culture in which value is divorced from materials and skills seems now dépassé. Yet a surprising amount of the analysis of these things from the past and the present mobilises the material as an entrée to a route that, however valuable in displacing the orthodoxy of written evidence, prioritises historical practices such as taxonomic and collecting histories, the economic history of consumption and production, the history of science, the analysis of narrative and the history of human perception over and above the concreteness of the artefact. [[10]](#endnote-10)

Certainly there is no materiality that is not also textual or discursive. There can be no access to things pure and uncontaminated. The aim of this essay is, however, to refocus attention on the materiality of a particular category of thing in northern civic and secular culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The death mask is both manufactured and yet somehow organic through its proximity to the skull in form and through production, one that instantiates both desire and repudiation, and one that occupies a position “at the edge” in many senses – the conditions of its production, the marginal position it occupies within the museum world of useful or ornamental artefacts, and most of all its affective character. This ramifies into wider questions such as what is the order of the object? What is the nature of the relationship between the biological body and its representations? How does the documentary interact with the aesthetic, history with theory, the art work with the archive? This is not a history of death masks and how they are made, [[11]](#endnote-11) but in attending to the material specificities of a particular genre of artefact I describe some of the creative anachronisms inspired by these difficult-to-categorise, and yet fascinating, things. I look at evidence (from 1813 and from 1928 indicating the main focus of my study) of how casts from the human body and especially from the face of a deceased person aroused viewers in the past. Equally I address how we might move beyond a functional explanation of casts as sculptors’ *aide-mémoires* to understanding how these materially minimal arts of death carry such a semantic charge.

First, a very brief chronological background. It is thought that death masks may have been part of Roman funerary rites. We know from Pliny that wax “faces” were kept in cupboards in the atrium and paraded at funerals. They were commemorative and naturalistic. The wax with which they were made was painted to look even more life-like and these masks differed from the idealising marble busts that had supplanted them by the time Pliny the Elder was writing his Natural History (dedicated AD 77). [[12]](#endnote-12) They have thus been termed “extreme portraits”. [[13]](#endnote-13) The most detailed research on death masks relates to the funerary obsequies of European monarchs in the Middle Ages and early modern period. [[14]](#endnote-14) Life sized wooden effigies were made, the heads of which would be modelled from a death mask taken in wax, and placed on top of the coffin in which the corpse was carried. Hair would cover the missing ears and back of the head. As Jennifer Woodward points out, the purpose was display as a stimulus or prompt to expressions of public grief. The practice was not, she states, abandoned until long after 1625. [[15]](#endnote-15) But the death mask independent of funerary rites appears to have developed in the seventeenth century.

In England one of the earliest examples of a non-royal death mask is that of Oliver Cromwell who died in 1658. [[16]](#endnote-16) The death mask as an *aide* to memorial sculpture probably first appeared when Michael Rysbrack had a death mask made of Isaac Newton, who died in 1727, to help him with his monument in Westminster Abbey.[[17]](#endnote-17) The taking of death masks in France, Germany and England expanded with the cult of great men and accelerated following the French Revolution. Thus in 1778 the sculptor Houdon was authorised to take a death mask of Rousseau. Madame Tussaud, who came from Alsace Lorraine and trained with Philippe Curtius (1737-1794), imported ideas and techniques to France.[[18]](#endnote-18) In Germany the cult of great men resulted in a sequence of end-of-century death masks: Frederick II of Prussia in 1786, Lessing in 1781, Schiller in 1805, Haydn in 1809, Weber in 1826, Beethoven in 1827 and Hegel in 1831. [[19]](#endnote-19) A similar line up is found in England where the practice continued into the early years of the twentieth century and beyond.

Popular phrenology, with its teaching that certain areas of the brain had localised functions and its mission to read “the most impalpable functions of the psyche within the material cortex” [[20]](#endnote-20) depended heavily upon casts from heads and skulls. Predicting greatness and criminality from such casts necessarily merged with physiognomics as sciences of the unseen.[[21]](#endnote-21) To this we owe macabre collections such as the so-called Black Museum at New Scotland Yard where the death masks of executed criminals formerly displayed at Newgate Jail (fig 2) are now kept.[[22]](#endnote-22) The large number of death masks that record only the face (or in which the remainder of the head is evidently fabricated) suggests that outside phrenological societies, it was the face that was paramount. Surviving collections of masks, such as those at Princeton University, Edinburgh University and the National Portrait Gallery, London, illustrate one of the problems facing scholars working on masks taken in the nineteenth century when imprints were taken not only from dead bodies but also from the living. It is often impossible to tell whether masks were taken from life or after death; [[23]](#endnote-23) the mask of William Blake was actually taken from life but it would be hard to know from looking at it (fig 3).[[24]](#endnote-24) Moreover the term “death mask” is sometimes used even when it is explicit that the subject was living, as is the case with the surrealists whose activities in this genre were inspired by Ernst Benkard’s photographic collection *Das ewige Antlitz* of 1926.[[25]](#endnote-25) Both life masks and death masks record the immobilised features of someone who is either already dead or who will die. The connection between portraiture and mortality is here at its most vivid (portraits are made in the expectation they will outlast their subjects).[[26]](#endnote-26) While a portrait from life seems to freeze the sitter for perpetuity in defiance of biological dissolution, the death mask is both closer (an imprint) and more distant from the subject who is at the moment of representation in an important sense no longer there especially as the look, so significant in portraiture, is veiled. Furthermore smothering the face of a living subject with plaster, obliging them to breathe through two small tubes while the plaster hardens, replays the primal fear of being buried alive; mishandled, it could actually cause death. [[27]](#endnote-27) Benjamin Robert Haydon tells how when casting from the live body he almost killed the man he was moulding when setting plaster caused pressure on internal organs.[[28]](#endnote-28)

The fact that it is so difficult sometimes to distinguish between casts made from the dead and those from living bodies is axiomatic: both in the drama of their production and in their material characteristics these masks epitomise the conundrum of the relationship between life and death. “Dying, like masking, is a rigidifying process” and the death mask (with the animal mask) has been regarded as the prototype of all masks. [[29]](#endnote-29) Nor is this quality of concretisation confined to faces. I see the cast, when dependent upon a body imprint, as in itself deathly regardless of the condition of the subject from which it is taken. By deathly I mean that the artefact invokes in the viewer the melancholy of an absence that is most definitively that of death. As Balzac’s Frenhofer says to Porbus in *Le Chef d’Oeuvre Inconnu* (1831-37):

The aim of art is not to copy nature, but to express it. You are not a servile copyist, but a poet. … Otherwise a sculptor might make a plaster cast of a living woman and save himself all further trouble. Well, try to make a cast of your mistress’s hand, and set up the thing before you. You will see a monstrosity, a dead mass, bearing no resemblance to the living hand; you would be compelled to have recourse to the chisel of a sculptor who, without making an exact copy, would represent for you its movement and its life. We must detect the spirit, the informing soul in the appearances of things and beings.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Why, Balzac’s sculptor is asking, is a white marble sculpture apprehensible as alive whereas a work that invokes an imprint pulls the viewer towards death? [[31]](#endnote-31) But what of marble or bronze sculpture based on imprints? The trace of the imprint is, I suggest, carried forward into other materials and it is this, along with truncation, that renders the objects I examine in this essay deathly.

Recognising the betwixt and between of the death mask – after death prior to burial – we might see its function as an attempt to hold onto the person. This liminality is registered also in the fact that “the mask of death” may refer not to a death mask but metaphorically to the frozen features of the dead face: a face that is also not a face. Moreover, the death mask is on the cusp also in the sense that it occupies a disputed space that is neither private nor public and, as Frenhofer testifies, belongs neither to the original nor to the copy. It constitutes a form of material stabilisation but one that in terms of signification is in process – becoming anachronistic. It is therefore interesting that the making of death masks (an archaic practice) was at its peak during the nineteenth century, the age of the mechanisation of the thing.[[32]](#endnote-32) Once a death mask is taken it is possible to produce multiple copies; by mechanical reproduction a series can be produced, though each one will become fainter in definition as the mould gets worn. What is uniquely human and individual – the face of the deceased – becomes a matrix generating a series in which each object will differ marginally from the one before. Decaying matter is reinvigorated as multiplied copy. A death mask proper consists of a face and, occasionally also the ears, but these masks (or the casts made from them) are regularly then augmented to appear like busts, a form that stands for the individual in their entirety and is so familiar we no longer notice it is a fragment. [[33]](#endnote-33)

The death mask in and of itself is not an aesthetic object; it is aestheticised as part of a tactical and artistic process whose objective is to distance the cast face from the actual face, to rinse it clean of the touch of the corpse and therefore of its association with decaying matter. Rhetorical as well as technical strategies further mediate the cast. “It is difficult to apply any aesthetic theory to a work like the mask of Sir Walter Scott; yet it has the simplicity and dignity of an immortal and gives the impression of belonging quite naturally to one of the schools of ancient China”, remarked a reviewer of Benkard’s book in 1929. [[34]](#endnote-34) Terminology sows confusion: the mould and the imprint, or cast, is each referred to as a death mask, an elision indicative of the desire to maintain the connection between face and mask. The death mask as matrix or mould is in direct contact with the face; the cast from the mould is at one remove. Each subsequent casting increases this distance. Beyond the mould is the face of the deceased, flesh without life; beyond the cast is nothing – plaster of Paris in a particular imprinted shape. By building up a head to back up the cast face, and sometime even shoulders or a torso, what is indexical becomes iconic. Dr. Johnson’s death mask is attached to a torso that happened to be in the sculptor’s studio (fig 4).[[35]](#endnote-35) The eyes which are closed after death, and which have to be shut during the making of a life mask, may be re-presented as open. Paint can be applied to give the appearance of bronze, marble or flesh. [[36]](#endnote-36)

A mask masquerades as a sculpture and thereby deludes us into thinking this not to be artisanship or mechanical reproduction but an example of artistic creativity; what was produced from a body in a near horizontal position is translated into a vertical: horizontal is dead while upright is alive. The death mask is awkward, poised between relic and memorial: attach a cord when the plaster is still wet and it is – like other casts on studio walls – a mere working tool (fig 5). [[37]](#endnote-37)Add the remainder of the head and it becomes an object in its own right. Examples of death masks incorporated into monumental sculptural forms survive from the Renaissance to recent times, their elaborate surrounds disguising technological challenges and distracting the viewer from the fragmented nature of the mask and the cadaverous look of the subject. The bust of Tasso is crowned with laurel and given an elaborate buttoned jerkin surmounted by a fancy ruff disguising where the death mask is joined to an invented torso [[38]](#endnote-38) and the bust of Princess Izabela Czartoryska (1746-1835), friend and correspondent of Lavater and herself a collector of death masks, is given open eyes, a neat fringe of sculpted hair and her entire face enclosed in a bonnet. [[39]](#endnote-39) In 1927 Professor Colin MacKenzie, Director of the National Museum of Australian Zoology acquired from the Royal College of Surgeons a copy of the death mask of John Hunter made for Sir Joshua Reynolds. Flanked by somewhat fanciful busts of Charles Bell and William Harvey, it now graces the lobby of what was the Museum (fig 6).[[40]](#endnote-40)

I The Death Mask and the Photograph

In the nineteenth century the imprint of the face after death retained its currency alongside the growing popularity of death-bed photography. [[41]](#endnote-41) Death masks continued to be valued perhaps on account of their monumentality and gravitas and the ease with which they could be replicated using techniques that had not changed since the Renaissance.[[42]](#endnote-42) But it is now through the intermediary medium of photography that most people encounter death masks and some initial consideration of this phenomenon will lend weight to my refocusing on the materiality of these artefacts. In the first place, an apparent historical contiguity has been remarked between the invention of photography and the imprinting of body parts in wax for medical purposes from the middle years of the nineteenth century.[[43]](#endnote-43) This interest in the connection between imprints and photography extends to the indexical character of the death mask; its immediate material relationship to the body/subject has given rise to what has been described by Louis Kaplan as a “chorus of visual thinkers (from André Bazin to Susan Sontag) who have thought about photography and photography’s being in the world in terms of the figure of the death mask”. [[44]](#endnote-44) Photography and the death mask are understood in these accounts as “plastic arts that have a shared interest in molding as well as the automatic nature of their modes of processing”. [[45]](#endnote-45) In these discussions, the Roman practice of making wax death masks to be situated in the home, as described by Pliny, is invoked. [[46]](#endnote-46) Thus death masks have been seen as part of the tradition of *effigies* with their tendency towards incarnation and, equally, like photography standing between life and death and between man and thing.[[47]](#endnote-47) Caution is needed. As Didi-Huberman explains: “likeness [*ressemblance*] achieved by contact guarantees the face of the deceased a life beyond the tomb” [[48]](#endnote-48) just, one might say, as photography does. But the same writer is insistent about the anachronism (for which he holds Vasari’s teleology responsible) of understanding these Roman wax masks as equivalent to busts, pointing out that they were highly coloured, serial, haptic and mobile. By Pliny’s time idealising portrait sculpture had taken their place.[[49]](#endnote-49) Drawing on a Warburgian paradigm, he insists:

One can only understand this phenomenon by situating it in the complex play of a social structure in which resemblance and ‘human reproduction’ are managed between contact and aspect, relic and effigy, symbolic gesture of the dead and symbolic gesture of the living, mourning and desire.[[50]](#endnote-50)

We might add that by the mid eighteenth century, and certainly by the nineteenth when taking death masks was most in vogue, wax had become synonymous with entertainment and with medical moulages, while plaster of Paris which was more durable but also less clean and tidy was used for death masks.[[51]](#endnote-51) A rare photograph (fig 7) shows just how extreme the process is with sloppy plaster being applied layer by layer to the face of a corpse – a far cry from the light writing of photography, from the objects of early photographers and, indeed, from the dignified full-frontal photographs of death masks that were popular in the early twentieth century. From the collection of George Grantham Bain, one of the first Americans to recognise that news photographs would ultimately transform journalism, the photograph (from an 8 x 10 negative) is thought to have been made after January 1908 but remains mysterious as it shows the mask being taken not as customary in the home of the deceased but in a studio by a *formatore* (in tie and waistcoat with a wooden modelling tool behind his ear) and his assistant. A white sheet has been hung at the right perhaps to provide privacy during this delicate operation and on shelves at the back are visible a collection of death masks, some constructed as complete busts.[[52]](#endnote-52)

In the second place, death masks and photography come together because it was Benkard’s collection of photographs published first in Germany in 1926 (fig 8) that cemented the association between the two media around the face of a dead person in a way that has been, and continues to be, highly influential. *Das ewige Antlitz* (*The Eternal Face*, translated into English and published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf in 1929 under the title *Undying Faces*) was reprinted nineteen times by 1935 and generated a series of similar publications. [[53]](#endnote-53) The popularity of Benkard’s work, it has been argued, owed something to the massive scale of death in the trenches of the First World War that overshadowed the entire decade of the 1920s and gave rise to “a vague desire to endow the phenomenon of death with meaning”, a significant part of which was the emerging culture of remembrance. [[54]](#endnote-54) Benkard’s mystical approach to death masks influenced other German writers: “While being moulded, something of the mystery of death passes into [the death mask] and remains inseparable from it …”.[[55]](#endnote-55) In a recent article on photography in the German Democratic republic, the photographed death mask is a point of reference for the history of portrait photography. Sarah E. James quotes a contemporary review of Benkard’s book in which the author argues that the remnants of individuality and society have been entirely rubbed off in death masks, their expressions likened to “stones that have been rolled around and polished by the sea”. [[56]](#endnote-56) Here, the death mask is characterized as universal (death the leveller), typical, and classificatory. James cites a 1982 exhibition in Dresden of the work of photographer Rudolf Schäfer, later published in West Germany, in which he showed a series of photographs of the faces of people who had recently died in hospital.[[57]](#endnote-57) So at the same time, ironically, in a repressive society the face of death offers, it is proposed, the possibility of expressing individuality.

Recently Jean Luc Nancy has drawn attention to Heidegger’s passing reference to a photograph of a death mask (his Marburg lectures were given in the same year as Benkard’s book was published) in his disentangling of Kant’s undifferentiated “image”. [[58]](#endnote-58) The photo of the death mask for Heidegger shows a death mask, the face of a dead man, and the photography itself. What interests Nancy in the death mask is, however, its sightlessness: “The gaze directed at the non-seer – our gaze directed at the mask – enters the empty eye as well as the back of the look and places sight in view [*met la vue en vue*]”.[[59]](#endnote-59) The photograph of a death mask opens itself up to a gaze while all the time masking another gaze behind closed eyes. Kaplan explains that for Nancy the death mask and the photograph are about ex-posure (to be posed in exteriority) and that the death mask is an emblem for the exposure of finitude - “for photography as the exposure of finitude in its simultaneous showing (and masking) of death”.[[60]](#endnote-60) What is clear is that Nancy is not thinking of the three-dimensional presence of the death mask but is concerned with what he calls the look of a dead man or the death of the look. [[61]](#endnote-61) In her study of eye miniatures, Hanneke Grootenboer addresses other kinds of portraiture involving departure or, as she puts it “the withdrawal of the gaze”. It is this withdrawal in the photograph of the death mask, she argues, that sums up the definition of an image for Heidegger. “We see what a dead man’s face looks like at the very moment that his gaze withdraws”. [[62]](#endnote-62)

My argument is that looking at the death mask *qua* object is a completely different experience and produces different meanings. Death masks *seem* familiar: they are as widely visible through photography, not least on the internet, as the objects themselves are invisible, for the most part hidden away in museum stores.[[63]](#endnote-63) The notion of the death mask like a stone “rolled and polished by the sea” that is comprehensible when the encounter takes place through a collection of photographs is utterly at odds with experiencing the three-dimensionality of the death mask. Coming face to face with, handling and touching, the imprint a deceased person’s face means encountering a cast in which not only all the wrinkles of skin may be visible, and in which there may be clearly seen the lines made when the mould was split (fig 9), but also in some instances the odd hair caught in the mould and transferred to the cast, as is the case with John Constable’s (fig 15c). [[64]](#endnote-64) Whereas it is unseeing eyes that provide the basis for the metaphor that Heidegger adopts and that exercises Nancy, the eyes are not necessarily what we first notice with a death mask; portraits of living subjects with their eyes closed are rare though not unknown [[65]](#endnote-65) but depending on the cause of death, the state of the corpse and decisions made by relatives as well as the *formatore*’s craft, in the material presence of a death mask we are likely to find ourselves attending to quite other areas of the head than the blank eye sockets. Since Roland Barthes famously proposed the experience of being photographed as a “micro-version of death” it has been difficult not to see something inherently “mortiferous” in photography since the medium leaves a trace of an absent presence. [[66]](#endnote-66) Yet the death mask is not about dying but about death: it belongs to the time after death but before putrefaction. The temporality of the death mask is determined not by life cycles, habitudes, weather conditions, social practices but by biology *tout court*.

II Artists, Artisans and Authenticity

While photographers claimed the status of artists from the start, death masks are by and large the work of nameless *formatori*, or casters. Demand for death masks for phrenological purposes, for casts of the hands of eminent writers, as well as the hands, feet and limbs of children, brought them to the fore in the nineteenth century when these objects were not only memorials but also ran parallel to the collecting of autographs.[[67]](#endnote-67) Sometimes the subjects were living and sometimes they were dead; sometimes the casts were used as the basis of a marble or bronze and sometimes they remained as plaster casts from the mould. There are exceptions to this anonymity. In Paris the firm of Lorenzi, founded in 1871, remains very much in business today; among the items offered for sale via the internet is the death mask of Dante in a range of materials natural and synthetic. [[68]](#endnote-68) The newly established Schools of Design in Britain required casts for students to copy, and many museums, medical and educational institutions also commissioned formatori who were at the same time making death masks. [[69]](#endnote-69) We know that a caster named Robert Glassby (d. 1892) worked for the sculptor Joseph Edgar Boehm (1834-1890) as he sometimes signed his work. [[70]](#endnote-70) In London there was also the firm of Brucciani: Dante Gabriel Rossetti died on 9 April 1882 and the following day his brother, William, sent a telegram to Bruccianis, who sent a man the same day to Birchington-on-sea in Kent to make casts of the face and hands of the deceased. A fellow artist, Frederick Shields, also did a drawing and then returned on April 12th for ‘a last look’. Rossetti was buried on 14th April. [[71]](#endnote-71) This must have been fairly typical but it does raise the interesting question of whether, given that Italians appear to have dominated the market, their skills were taken up in Protestant countries where showing the body is not a tradition and where, therefore, the death mask might provide an acceptable monstration.

The first phrenological society was established in Edinburgh in 1820 and by 1823 had amassed enough objects to warrant the opening of a museum. [[72]](#endnote-72) Records show that one Edinburgh firm, Luke O’Neil & Sons, “Statuaries” and “Artists to the Phrenological Society”, were employed with great regularity between 1827 and 1834 when the society was at its most active.[[73]](#endnote-73) Artists were viewed by phrenologists as natural allies and the names of men like the history painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, who gave the society a bust of Socrates in 1821, and the prominent Edinburgh artist and engraver, William Home Lizars who was paid in 1825 for drawing and engraving views of a cranometer, recur in the records of the society which gave artists free membership in recognition of their usefulness. [[74]](#endnote-74) But we still know little about *formatori* because they were, O’Neil’s insistence notwithstanding, regarded as artisans and not as artists.[[75]](#endnote-75) The fashion for casts must have brought some considerable wealth. James De Ville (1777-1846) is now remembered mainly for his life mask of William Blake (fig 3). But when this allegedly illiterate man of humble origins died, it was reported that he ran a profitable business in light-house fittings and plaster casting, was acquainted with literati like Harriet Martineau, George Eliot and Richard Carlile, and gave private lectures at his museum shop in The Strand. He left a collection of 5,000 skulls and casts.[[76]](#endnote-76) William Bally, “modeller and delineator” ran the Phrenological Gallery in King Street, Manchester in the 1830s and 40s as well as teaching plaster casting at the Mechanics’ Institute to which he donated his collection of over a thousand casts when he retired to his native Switzerland. [[77]](#endnote-77)

As the technician responsible for the production of the death mask the *formatore* guarantees the authenticity of the mask even if he does not sign it. By authenticity, I intend here the connection between the face of the dead person and the mould the mask represents to which an individual’s name is attached. However, casting raises other questions about authenticity. Although the notion of originality may seem curiously out-of-place in a discussion of death masks, it was very precisely over a dispute about a death mask that, earlier in the nineteenth century in France, an attempt was made to establish unequivocally in law who owned the copyright of a copy as opposed to an imitation. This important distinction had huge ramifications for portraiture as an art of likeness. Francesco Automarchi, Emperor Napoleon’s last physician, had brought back from St. Helena a death mask of the Emperor that he wished to cast in order to give copies to members of Napoleon’s circle. He gave the job of producing the casts from the mould to one Massimo. He soon became aware of rival casts circulating on the market but by that time Massimo had fled. In fact it was an English physician who had been responsible for the initiative and effort of taking the imprint. The arguments presented in court in 1834, analysed by Katie Scott, are complex but the outcome was that Automarchi was a mechanic and not an artist, he was “not the author of those features that lend the plaster all its value; in reproducing them he has no more than plagiarised Nature and Death”. [[78]](#endnote-78) It will be helpful to bear this in mind because one of many discomforting things about viewing casts is the ambiguous role of thesemechanics or artificers; with the metamorphosis of the delicate plaster cast into a solid and enduring bronze they are largely written out of the story.

There remains the question of the relationship between the death mask and the portrait. Two strands of argument have been of interest to art historians. In Harry Berger’s account, for example, death masks like those taken during the Italian Renaissance of Brunelleschi and of Lorenzo de’ Medici [[79]](#endnote-79) are absolutely objective portraits and stand in contradistinction to Roland Barthes’s schema in *Camera Lucida* in which the camera has a mortiferous impact on the subject. Instead, Berger argues, with the painter’s help, “sitters become living subjects by seeming either to resist or to fail to achieve [this objectification]”. Thus they produce effects of subjectivity. [[80]](#endnote-80) The “death mask of objectivity” is historically the starting point from which sitters “begin to rouse themselves to shake off this death”. [[81]](#endnote-81) Although Berger’s account of the fiction of the pose, as he calls it, is deservedly admired as an explanation of the performative and collaborative work of portraiture, he implicitly annexes the death mask as image rather than as thing. For him, the death mask is a representation from which nothing has been withdrawn. [[82]](#endnote-82)

Even if one accepts an imprint as objective regardless of the behaviour of the materials and the agency that handles both them and the malleable corpse, there are problems with this proposition, at least when addressing nineteenth-century death masks which are so frequently amended. Moreover, the matrix, or mould (the negative) is composed of perishable material and while the first cast may be close to the original, the more impressions taken the less definition there is until they may appear little more than outlines. With revered figures like Dante, casts of casts from copies of copies have been made. [[83]](#endnote-83) One example in the National Portrait Gallery will demonstrate the difficulty of regarding the mask as a representation from which nothing is withdrawn. The mask of Lord Beaconsfield, better known as Disraeli,

according to an inscription on the original mould, was taken six hours after death, at the behest of the sculptor Jacob Boehm. Joseph R. Tussaud acquired the mould or negative as a reference tool for his waxworks and it was his son, John T. Tussaud who offered to give a cast to the Gallery. [[84]](#endnote-84) However, when the mould was got out of storage “it was found to be in a very bad condition and required a good deal of careful attention before being used …”. [[85]](#endnote-85) What was “withdrawn” here were the marks of wear and tear ordinarily suffered by fragile objects without special storage and the ‘careful’ attention presumably meant restoration and inevitably also enhancement, thereby withdrawing from the object its relation of immediacy to the subject.

A second strand of interest among art historians focuses on the question, already touched on, of where, in the case of a cast, originality might lie. Unease about this is reflected in the difficulty of applying a title and an author to a death mask; whereas in a portrait one would normally state x (name of sitter) by y (name of artist) in so far as there is a common practice it seems to be “death mask of x taken by y” even though “y” may be a sculptor who commissioned it rather than the caster who took it. Walter Benjamin’s age of mechanical reproduction [[86]](#endnote-86) alerted us to the photograph’s seriality while Rosalind Krauss has further argued that the idea of an authentic bronze cast of a Rodin sculpture (*The Gates of Hell*) makes no sense because the artist’s intentions were not known and his relationship to the casting of his work was remote.[[87]](#endnote-87) For his part, Didi-Huberman has argued for an “operative chain” through which imprints and their *ressemblance* to the original are profoundly rooted in reproduction and genealogy (to resemble is firstly to resemble your parents) but above all in a certain rapport between life as given and life as lost.[[88]](#endnote-88) Although Didi-Huberman has much to say about imprints across a wide range – including medical casts and the casts made by Marcel Duchamp – it is his recognition of this relationship between what is there and what is not there that is enormously important for understanding death masks:

The genealogy defines itself first in a certain rapport between *life given* and *life lost*. In order to transmit an inheritance – and resemblance is one such –it is necessary first to die. And for the forms themselves to transmit, to survive, it is also necessary for them to know how to disappear.[[89]](#endnote-89)

For Didi-Huberman, the Vasarian insistence on the *idea* over and above the *thing* that can be touched has skewed the history of art and obscured the role of craftsmen.

Abject means to cast out, to exclude and to reject. The imprint is abject – it connotes absence of something cast away whether by intention, accident or the passage of time. In this case it is the corpse that has been excluded, leaving the death mask as its trace. Imprints are part of everyday life but even in the case, for example, of the child’s boot in the mud or the dog’s footprints in the sand, they are also suggestive in that they signal the connection between a body that is no longer there and a material thing that remains. They evoke absences and, in their fragmentary character suggest disembodiment. Thus death masks are both familiar, what we know in the form of the human face, and unfamiliar, human flesh rigidified by the effects of death and by plaster. It is this melding of the familiar with the unfamiliar that resonates and arouses. An example from literature helps explain this transmission.

Robinson Crusoe sees a single imprint of a human foot on the beach of an island where he has for fifteen years believed himself to be the sole inhabitant. His longing for human company is instantly displaced by terror. He eventually returns to the place, thinking that perhaps it was his own footprint that he saw, but finds his foot much smaller which serves to intensify his anxiety. [[90]](#endnote-90) The imprint is like him but not him, a terrifying doubling that provokes dread of being consumed, by cannibals. This is a crisis of identity. His situation has been inverted: what he had imagined to be a natural paradise is a place of possible annihilation. He is no longer King of his domain but a terrified subject. For Robinson Crusoe the sight of an imprint is in the short term a negative experience. But imprints are also literally negatives. From them a positive can be made. We thus have a binary structure that permits, as we have remarked, not only one duplication but also multiplication. This is how Antony Gormley is able to distribute re-presentations of his body around London and elsewhere. More disturbing is Rachel Whiteread’s use of imprints since what she presents us with is the Crusoe experience – it is the negative that we see. Her famous 1992 *House* uses the interior walls of a Victorian house as the positive presence (the cannibal’s foot) to create a mould and that is what she then shows us, inverting something everyday into something utterly strange (fig 10).[[91]](#endnote-91)

Unlike artists, *formatori* seldom leave descriptions of how they work. However, we have one such and, assuming that the account is reasonably unembroidered or aggrandised, it usefully puts paid to the notion that there is something automatic, a lack of human intervention in the making of a death mask.

The sculptor Georg Kolbe (1877-1947), who seems not to have employed a middle man, emphasises the importance of being called out early before the features have stiffened and, while he describes his profession as like modelling (ie sculpting with clay) from the life, his text makes clear that it is flesh and bone not clay he is working with: “ … the dead must be rightly handled. They lie there helpless, they are marvellously pliant before rigidity sets in”. He goes on to explain how he makes a death mask:

I lay the head low in the line of exact equilibrium so as to avoid compressing and displacing the relaxed muscles and skin. The eyelids and lips are gently closed, the chin is propped, and so on. All this a careful nurse would normally do, but without sensing the true expression, the individuality, and without perseverance. The hair is combed smooth and often arranged in an unaccustomed manner. Hands which perhaps were never folded in life are laid across the body in an attitude of prayer, without regard for the personality. How much can be feigned with the dead, and how they can be distorted. Especially, the features are vastly sensitive; the smallest touch is powerful to redress or mar … .

The parts where hair is growing on the face, are painted over with a thin solution of modelling clay or with oil, so that the plaster may not adhere when it is poured over. The skin itself contains enough fat and needs no preparation. The outline of the mask, the parts on the neck, behind the ears and so on, are surrounded with the thinnest of damp paper. Unfortunately there is hardly ever enough time to mould the whole head, back and front … . A large bowl of plaster of the consistency of soup is ladled over the face a few millimeters in thickness; then a thread is drawn over the middle of the forehead, the bridge of the nose, the mouth and chin. A second bowl of more solid plaster is spread over the first layer like pulp (this is to provide a firm outer shell), and before it sets the thread is drawn away, dividing the whole into two halves. As soon as the outer layer has set hard, the halved mould is broken apart and carefully detached from the head; this is the difficult step … . The halves thus detached are immediately fitted together and clamped, the negative is cleaned and refilled with plaster.[[92]](#endnote-92)

Although Kolbe is responsible for making the death mask, he does not initiate the process. And here the question arises of the ownership of the object from which an imprint is to be taken, that is the face of the corpse – the original that is the ultimate guarantee of an authenticity that cannot subsequently be verified. The death mask might be said in these circumstances to be a certified copy, to quote the title of Abbas Kiarostami’s 2010 film. We do not hear of a dying person requesting a death mask; we know by contrast that such arrangements are made at the behest of relatives or, most frequently, sculptors with an eye to a commission, or public figures with an interest in commemoration. Taking a death mask brings into tension two vectors: the obligation to the corpse which, as Pogue Harrison states, one finds everywhere one looks across the spectrum of human culture, and the desire to commemorate, to secure and hold on to a trace. It has been remarked that today we expect total rights over our disposal, that there is an assumption of self’s ownership of its cadaver. [[93]](#endnote-93) The bond between self and corpse gives rise to discussions about organ donation, about who has jurisdiction over the fate of human remains. It is no accident that sociologists have recently coined the term post-self.[[94]](#endnote-94) Historically the classical hierarchy of the body has privileged the head with the face understood to encapsulate the self. Modern-day experiments in face recognition techniques add a further dimension to this, and debates about face transplants further indicate both the cultural pre-eminence of the face in relation to selfhood - and its vulnerability. The stresses around making imprints of the face of a dead person and the tensions between obligation and art are clearly documented in the historical accounts of death masks suggesting that, while they share with other kinds of imprints a particular resonance, their making occasions difficult psychic responses and, once produced, they become extreme and highly affective objects.

This desire for a guaranteed copy may be understood as part of the search for authentic likenesses of historical figures that has always stimulated portrait

collecting. [[95]](#endnote-95) However, among artists and cognoscenti from the eighteenth century and through the early years of the nineteenth, prior to the popular rhetoric of phrenology, there was equivocation over the death mask as an authentic likeness, less on grounds of modifications in the making and more on grounds of the state of the face of someone on their death bed in relation to the public idea of their appearance. Here the abjection so aptly articulated by Kristeva is fundamental: “Refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live … “. [[96]](#endnote-96) Joseph Farington records a conversation about the relative merits of portraits of William Pitt the younger by William Owen and John Hoppner. The lower part of Pitt’s face in the death mask cast by or for the sculptor Joseph Nollekens, who was to execute a portrait bust, was described as “bad – falling in” and Hoppner told Nollekens he should come to him for assistance. [[97]](#endnote-97) We have here a clear example of the problem of likeness in portraiture: if the best portrait is a like portrait, what is it like ? [[98]](#endnote-98) There is also the question of who is viewing a death mask. In 1812 Nollekens took, or supervised the taking of, a cast of the assassinated Prime Minister Spencer Perceval, after waiting for the coroner to finish his work. Lord Arden objected to Nollekens taking the cast away but the sculptor persuaded him that it would be better to “make it more fit to be viewed”. Thereafter, we are told, many Ladies and Gentleman called to see the cast and were much affected. [[99]](#endnote-99) However, Farington also gives us evidence of other uses of death masks in which, by contrast with a public sculptured bust, the “falling in” does not seems to matter. At Nollekens’s house, Farington showed some friends the cast “made from Mr. Pitt’s face and also that from the Duchess of Devonshire; they were placed together; and considering their political differences, & the party opposition in which she had often acted against him, it was to me a subject for reflection to see all thus terminated”.[[100]](#endnote-100) In other words here is a homily in plaster of Paris on the ultimate futility of political dissent. Doubtless the advent of 3D printing, and the opening of a photo booth in New York “allowing customers to print an exact likeness of their own heads” will in future render the death mask redundant. [[101]](#endnote-101)

William Pitt the younger and Charles James Fox, the two giants of British parliamentary politics in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, both died in 1806. Comparison of their death masks naturally succeeded the comparisons that had been made throughout their lives. Maria Edgeworth, visiting Cambridge University Library in 1813, saw three “casts taken after death”, of Pitt, Fox, and Charles 12th of Sweden (fig 11a) with “the hole where the bullet entered, while he was urging the engineer to hasten the works at the siege of Frederickshall” in 1718, all of which she found “very striking” (fig 11b). In fact, while the hole made in the right temple by the half pound bullet is, indeed, visible one would never (viewing the death mask) imagine that, in Voltaire’s words, “The left eye was beat in, and the right quite out of its Socket”. [[102]](#endnote-102) The cast of Pitt she found very like the print images she was already familiar with and very “like a statue taken from life”. But the cast of Fox she found “shocking! Not in the least like any bust or picture of him and said to be so unlike what he *was* in health that no one could know it to be him – no character or greatness or ability – nothing but pain, weakness, or imbecility”. [[103]](#endnote-103) There had indeed been prevarication about whether a death mask of Fox should be taken. The doctor who attended Fox had called on Nollekens shortly after his death and proposed that “an opportunity ought not to be lost in the instance of so great a man”. Nollekens said that probably the corpse would look so changed that it would not be worth doing but the doctor assured him that this was not the case. When Nollekens arrived, he saw that Fox was unrecognisable but nonetheless took a cast. Having taken measurements for a bust when Fox was alive, he measured the head again and found that in death “the face had shrunk an Inch and a half, & other parts in proportion”. [[104]](#endnote-104) To Maria Edgeworth, however, the experience was worthwhile because of this very *unlikeness* (the inverse of a photograph), the lack of artistic enhancement, the raw replication of the face after death rather than the face remembered or constructed from an accumulation of images:

We cannot help looking at casts taken after death with curiosity and interest and yet it is not probable that they should mark the real, natural, or habitual character of the person; they often can only mark the degree of bodily pain or ease felt in the moments of death. I think these Casts made me pause to reflect more than anything I saw this day.[[105]](#endnote-105)

Here the affect recorded is less that of the *memento mori* and more the momentary shock of recognition of pain - the death mask as a means of accessing the somatic. If it is sublime it is the sublimity of scientific observation rather than of horror.

These instances of an aporia in relation to imprints of dead faces raise questions of ownership and access to the corpse, especially when a famous figure is involved; the extremely physical and viscous process of making a death mask, a contentious process that has always to be completed at speed, is vividly illustrated in the case of Thomas Carlyle who died on 5 February 1881 (fig 12). The sculptor Boehm who, as a longstanding friend of Carlyle must have anticipated commissions, approached Mary Carlyle, the writer’s secretary and wife of his nephew. At first she refused to allow a death mask to be taken on the grounds that her uncle had suffered so much that his features were no longer as they had been in life. But Boehm managed to persuade her and sent a caster (the sculptor Alfred Gilbert), presumably on the 6th February. There ensued a bizarre sequence of events in which access was refused but Gilbert managed to get upstairs anyway and take the imprint while his assistant dealt with the arrival of a policeman who had been sent for.[[106]](#endnote-106) The following day, Mary Carlyle wrote to Boehm to complain that “your man” had said it would take no more than a quarter of an hour but: “he has taken a cast of the whole head and has to our great vexation and annoyance worked upon it for two hours and a half leaving everything so spotted and disarranged that we must again endure a visit from the undertaker”. She goes on, “he has taken a very great liberty, and he has given me more pain than I can express”. [[107]](#endnote-107) The following year Boehm completed the bronze statue of Carlyle that now graces Chelsea Embankment but bears little resemblance to the death mask (fig 13).[[108]](#endnote-108)

III Surfaces: Cavities: Inscriptions

In 1928, the incumbent Archbishop of Canterbury, finding the death mask of a predecessor, Archbishop Archibald Campbell Tait who died aged 71 in 1882, perhaps tucked away in some corner while tidying his study in Lambeth Palace, wrote to offer it to the National Portrait Gallery (fig 14a). He finds it hard to disguise his distaste: “It is much discoloured and not an attractive object, but it was taken from the actual face”, he says, it “…is rather unsuited to public view. Perhaps you have a store for such things”. [[109]](#endnote-109) So within the space of forty-six years, an artefact deemed of sufficient importance to have been produced under pressure of time, enhanced by the provision of a plaster rest like a pillow, and painted to resemble bronze or possibly flesh, is regarded as only fit to be entombed in a museum store whence it probably has never emerged apart from routine conservation checks until I went to photograph it in Southwark in August 2011. It is literally abject – unwanted. Certainly Campbell Tait’s death mask is in poor condition, knocked about and with the paint flaking off, but despite finding it disagreeable, the donor could not quite jettison it, his letter suggests, on account of the relationship – the point of contact leading to a trace – between this plaster and the face of a living human subject even when this is at one remove.

Looking at the front of the mask we marvel at the way every wrinkle of this immobile face is reproduced. But this is a three-dimensional thing and so there is also a back (fig 14b). This presents a very different spectacle. Onto the hollowed out grotto-like surface is nailed a piece of paper on which is written a note in two hands (fig 14c). It states that R. Glassby cast the head for J.E. Boehm and gives the latter’s address in Fulham. The Museum accession number is also there. These inscriptions take us away from any sense of reverence before the imprint of a dead face and into the workaday world of commercially oriented sculpture production. They also, however, take us into a practice complementary to sculpture, that of writing: memoirs, death masks, commemorative busts, autographs are complementary cultural practices. Ostensibly the inscription has a purpose. Joseph Edgar Boehm, who has been described as cornering “the market of the famous and fashionable”, [[110]](#endnote-110) created the subsequent memorials to Archbishop Campbell Tait including a bust and an effigy in Canterbury Cathedral: in both, the sunken features of the mask are restored to something more fleshy and life-like. The note ensured that should anyone wish to commission further casts the sculptor who would have kept the mould could oblige.

Leaving aside its functionality, there is something shocking about this inversion - the view behind the mask. The wholeness of the smoothed plaster of the face in which every wrinkle is registered, and the closed eyes with their aura of serenity, as well as the artistic sleight of hand which encourages us not to look too closely at where the plaster ends or ask what happened to the ears, are suddenly reversed. We find ourselves looking at plaster as it has dried or been hacked away; its ragged surface has something of decomposing flesh (a sort of corporeal unconscious) that is central to the ritual of taking a cast of a dead face. The recollection of the facial imprint we saw is overlaid by the sense of some violence where the nail – now rusting – has been hammered into what the outside has been persuading us to see as a human head. This strange crypt-like cavity stands as the negation of that smooth impenetrable surface of the face with its eyes and orifices closed, a negation behind which, to borrow from Bakhtin, “is by no means nothingness but the ‘other side’ of that which is denied”. [[111]](#endnote-111)

In the case of John Constable’s death mask (figs 15a, 15c), the reverse (fig 15b) reveals similarly the marks of the moulding tool and palette knife, its dark cave-like interior offering no clue as to the appearance or identity of the subject. The viewer is caught between antipathy and the sense that this is a mask that one might place over one’s own face, so assuming the identity of the dead in the way that wax *imagines maiorum* were used at Roman funerals, pointing up what has been described as the anthropomorphic quality of the death mask. [[112]](#endnote-112) The wooden supporting strut makes visible *process,* a technology of making, only to remind us of an unmaking. Recognition of the cavities behind these masks takes us uncomfortably close to those other procedures that follow upon decease: anatomical dissection and, above all, autopsy. Once the organs are removed nothing remains but a cavity, in short the dehumanisation of what has been through such effort remembered. To be sure, it may be said that we are not expected to look behind the façade but the point is that this displaced grotesque other (a rough-hewn tomb-like interiority that seems the inverse of human) is intrinsic to the object’s construction and, even if not visible to sight is visible in the mind’s eye. We know it to be there; it is interdependent with what we see. This knowledge, once acquired, subverts the illusion of a commemorative resemblance and brings back into the frame disturbing ideas about dissolution.

Then there is the writing inside the Archbishop’s mask (fig 14c), an intervention that on this interior of a body replication equally shatters the illusion of the exteriority of that dead face. There are the names, a subject and two sculptors, raising again the question of whether this is a work of art or a document, and if it is the former who the artist is? If it is not a work of art, then what exactly is it and who or what is its subject? The inscriptions reconfigure the death mask as record and connect it with display and museology. Four different kinds of head are preserved in museums with an interest in phrenology and portraiture: death masks, portrait busts, phrenological heads (those doll-like heads on which were marked the brain’s supposed zones) and – in the case of medical museums which now sometimes house phrenological collections – skulls.[[113]](#endnote-113) Phrenology is synonymous with human heads to the extent that the ornamentation on the building erected in Edinburgh by the Phrenological Society comprises a collection of heads. [[114]](#endnote-114) In the mid 1820s, freights of crania, casts of skulls and death masks were being delivered to the Society weekly from Paris, Dublin, Liverpool, Hamburg, Bristol and as far afield as Canada. [[115]](#endnote-115) In the museum, the four kinds of heads I have named were virtually homologous: they were ‘read’, catalogued, and discoursed upon both publicly and privately. Occupying a single space, works of art (busts), human remains (skulls and crania), pedagogic aids (phrenological heads) and death masks could be written about and written on. The phrenological heads are written over: their increasingly crowded inscriptions indicative of the expanding theories of the pseudo-science.[[116]](#endnote-116) The portrait busts are often copies of copies of samples in a series and may be inscribed with the subject’s name. Death masks, as we have seen, may be written in, and crania – since it is not easy to write inside, were written on. Some crania were marked in black ink or paint with the regions associated with each organ as though they were, like the busts and masks, also manufactured. [[117]](#endnote-117) In other instances it is a racial identification (fig 16). ‘ESKMINO’ (sic) is written in capital letters on the forehead of one specimen in Edinburgh. [[118]](#endnote-118)

“Difficult to display”, death masks shrouded in bubble wrap, stored at the National Portrait Gallery London in purpose-built wooden boxes with glass lids, oblige the viewer to look down at them as at a relic.[[119]](#endnote-119) By contrast the Edinburgh Phrenological Society paid a man to dust the casts, busts, death masks and other material permanently on display.[[120]](#endnote-120) However, we do not know *how* the skulls were displayed.[[121]](#endnote-121) Encountering these marked up human remains today is an arresting experience. Whereas the death mask results from a controlled artisanal act in the ostensible interests of remembrance, and documents a moment post death and pre interment, the skull is disinterred and bespeaks the dissolution that the mask strives to disregard. Yet annexed into a collection of heads these objects move from a degree of anonymity more extreme than any abandoned or unidentified death mask to occupy a central space of documentation. They are contiguous with death masks in every sense but no longer heads; in a large proportion the mandibles have been either lost or discarded (the lower jaw section had little value for phrenologists) so they are fragments of skulls, inscribed and ordered taxonomically.

The idea of body cavities that destabilises our sense of what it is to be embodied when we encounter the reverse side of a death mask is here inescapable. The object is more empty than full, a hollow shell with gaping holes. What was the face the *formatore* so carefully imprinted here comprises yawning cavities; there is nothing to impress. The features that might have made the mould have dissolved. Disinterred objects trouvés (like number XXI.A.2 in the Bengali section “found in a mango swamp on the Banks of the Ganges”) (fig 17) the crania are then inscribed by racial types and sometimes also by markings to indicate phrenological zones. What was through biology de-faced has been subsequently defaced in the interests not of memory but of the pursuit (albeit misguided) of knowledge. If the death mask is about capturing a disappearing identity, the defaced cranium is about an identity lost in the decay of flesh and newly recreated in a language of colonial appropriation. The crania are valued not for who they were (Hamlet’s “Alas, Poor Yorick!” points up the impossibility of connecting skull with human being as remembered)[[122]](#endnote-122) but for what they represent. Robert Cox (1810-72) an Edinburgh phrenologist wrote “On the Character and Cerebral Development of the Esquimaux” in the early 1830s and we may assume that his evidence was drawn from section XVI.C in the Museum though who was responsible for wrongly spelling Eskimo is unknown.[[123]](#endnote-123)

Dealing with imprints and inscribing recalls the mystic writing pad in which Freud addresses the problem of writing and retaining a trace of what has been written while simultaneously having space to write more.[[124]](#endnote-124) He uses this toy as a metaphor for materialised memory, for that part of the unconscious to which memory allows access while the rest is still there but not accessible. Central to Freud’s discussion is erasure that is never absolute because a trace is retained. It is a helpful metaphor with which to conclude this section. As object, nature translated into culture, the collected cranium seems to stand for erasure - loss and vacuity in its material and historical presentation. The pen scratching into the bone of the cranium obliterates as it creates a type. But nothing is ever absolutely erased. As museum object the cranium retains the material reminder of its humanity while the erased subject opens up new unlimited spaces for superimposed impressions: donors, origins, epistemologies, conservation, calligraphy, geo-politics, micro-biological procedures … .

IV ‘A Still Renewable Fear’

The human cranium displayed in a museum, both formally and conceptually, marks the extremity of portrait’s purview - the presentation of material as identity. Instead of the imprint of a flesh-covered armature (as with the death mask of Archbishop Campbell Tait (fig 14a)) we have the bone cleaned of flesh by the passage of time. What the death mask suggests, the skull avers. But suggestiveness (affect) is what I am concerned with and so, this final section, addresses not only imprints of dead faces but also imprints of body parts made for non-medical purposes. If we consider how the death mask of the royal academician Sir Thomas Lawrence, who died in 1830, was displayed and how it now appears, we may begin to apprehend how an imprint becomes the protagonist in a drama of things (fig 18a). I want to set aside the idea of (untouchable) relics that encasing casts in glass-fronted boxes might initially invoke in order to draw out the ways in which the sight of what is already arresting is both accommodated and intensified by allusion to touch. This object was originally preserved in a brass handled oak box in the lid of which were: “an engraving of [the artist] with his pen and chalk stump let in just below” (figs 18b, 18c).[[125]](#endnote-125) The two halves of the box were at some point separated so there are now two vitrines, one with the mask that was enhanced to show a glimpse of night shirt and a toga-like bed cover, effectively cradling the head (fig 18a). The whole is painted in a glossy cream varnish to resemble marble. To maintain the illusion that he is at rest, which the surrounds to the head are designed to create, the box has to be laid flat so any viewer has to look down into it. The lid of the box was at some point after its arrival at the Gallery replaced with glass but the original lid survives and contains not only the engraving, chalk holder and two stumps, but also a pencil and a lock of the artist’s hair fastened with a black ribbon superimposed over his autograph initials “TL” (fig 18c).

The experience of opening this box (before it was disassembled) and finding the bodily and mental life fixed behind glass in perpetual self-referentiality must have been extraordinary. The engraved portrait showing the man in life, accompanied by physical traces (signature and lock of hair) and the tools marked by use, was literally folded in upon the after-death imprint of the mask, to be opened up and viewed and then again entombed. It operates as a funerary replay inverting reality: the objects in the lid with their functionality and their DNA offer themselves as palpable and life-affirming whereas the mask with its cosmetic manipulations appears artistic and otherworldly. Whereas in fact we know that the death mask approximates to the corpse while the objects so carefully preserved are just so much debris of the sort that Joseph Cornell in the 1960s and 70s assembled in boxes that he described as ‘a kind of forgotten game, a philosophical toy of the Victorian era’.[[126]](#endnote-126) The fact that the cast of the artist’s right hand, limp and unmistakeably deathly, donated from the same source, was never part of the boxed collection is further evidence of the effort to maintain the equilibrium.[[127]](#endnote-127) “Glass’s pellucid transitivity – you can see through it – represents at the same time the first gradation of opacity. It is both *medium* and *barrier*”;[[128]](#endnote-128) by analogy the objects viewed through this glass are both a means of accessing the subject and a barrier to the corpse which that subject now is. The Lawrence box might be said to be a museum within a museum, that in its oscillating and repetitive variants on a theme mimics the death drive in its rhythm of fascination-repulsion, and reminds us of Adorno’s reflection on the relationship between the museum and the mausoleum.[[129]](#endnote-129)

The most “improved” objects derived from imprints are those that are carved from marble using the cast as a model. Whereas a death mask, unless deliberately manipulated, often bears the marks of its making, a marble sculpture (as Balzac remarked) is rinsed clean of visceral associations and fleshy deformities and polished into perfection. And yet, the mortiferous connections are hard to eradicate: viewers who do not know their history often mistake the sequence of seemingly severed limbs cast after Queen Victoria’s children for casts after death (figs 19a, 19b).[[130]](#endnote-130) However all Queen Victoria’s children survived into adult life. The sequence of thirteen sculptures made after casts of feet and hands were displayed on velvet cushions under glass domes in the Queen’s private apartments; [[131]](#endnote-131) while the glass was ostensibly to protect the objects from dirt and discoloration, it must also have had the effect of intensifying the sense that these things occupy a different space from that of everyday living. So what is it that lends these severed extremities their compelling visuality? The invitation to touch, stroke, hold the hand, fondle the toes is accompanied by a denial of access. Encased in glass (which we have to imagine), they refuse the viewer’s desire for contact. The hands, particularly, conjure the need to touch; Rodin made one hundred and fifty casts of hands which he deliberately left lying in drawers. He would, a contemporary reported, “pick them up tenderly one by one and then turn them about and lay them back”. [[132]](#endnote-132) Hands, as Leo Steinberg points out, are weightless and tireless and “live in perpetual adaptation and transit, unlike the hard-bottomed space that supports our bodies”. [[133]](#endnote-133) Once cast in bronze and mounted, Rodin’s hands lose this mobility.

There is a conundrum since Queen Victoria’s baby bits are similarly mobile and unmounted and yet they have been immobilised on cushions under glass, marble caressed by velvet. This immobility emphasises the truncations with their incipient sense of violence, of breakage, rupture, damage and salvage. Death masks are also truncated and we have seen, as with the cases of Dr. Johnson and ThomasLawrence, some of the modifying extensions produced to soften this. But with death masks, the face is an object of such fascination, and the face on its own plus or minus neck, shoulders or trunk has been authorised since classical antiquity as standing in for selfhood that the severance from the body is less shocking, though nonetheless still disturbing. The truncations, for all the smooth polished marble surfaces and the reflective glass domes signifying aesthetic purity, pull these limbs away from the sanitized sphere of fine art and into an association with other kinds of severances and fragmentations: amputations, anatomical specimens, surgical prostheses and votive offerings.

There is something fetishistic about this repetitive sequence of substitutions for children’s body parts; each appears to represent a compromise, some *thing* so very different from the two-dimensional illusionistic representation of the loved child in his or her entirety (fig 20). By serving as a memorial, a “token of triumph” (cast from the living limbs) they work both as an acknowledgement of death (the ultimate loss that haunted all parents) [[134]](#endnote-134) and simultaneously as a disavowal of that threat (flesh transmuted into works of art).[[135]](#endnote-135) In the case of two chubby hands (fig 19a) the sculptor has disguised the terminations with an elaborate natural arrangement: a rose, shamrock leaves, a thistle (which together symbolise the three nations of the Union) and a butterfly in one and in the other oak leaves and acorns (another nationalistic symbol). The experiment seems not to have been repeated perhaps because the subliminal associations with floral wreaths and even with transi tombs with their invasive natural life emerging from the earth to feed on the corpse were more unsettling than the cut with its reminder of butchery. The undisguised truncation leaves open the question of where the remainder of the body might be but attention is then deflected by the way the limbs press down on their cushions and by the secure domes from which these hands and feet are not free to wander. [[136]](#endnote-136)

Casts were taken of all the royal infants but the idea that this was a solution to fidgety models does not explain the existence of these casts since they were never used for full-scale sculpture. [[137]](#endnote-137) These replicas [[138]](#endnote-138) take us back to the idea of footprints and hand-prints. One of the child’s early learning experiences is of imprints – the boot’s sole in the mud, the jammy hand on the tablecloth. Imprints are signs of the uniqueness of the individual and, until the discovery of DNA, were the chief means of identification. Isolated from the child’s body, feet and hands petrified and reified insist upon identity while refusing the notion of an independent life in time in which the child will grow and no longer be a child. It is perhaps for this reason that the practice of taking casts from babies remains so popular. [[139]](#endnote-139) The body represented by feet and hands has no power of sight and is, literally, disembodied thus reversing Lacan’s mirror stage in which the child sees, in its reflection (whether this implies a glass or an adult face matters not) a promise of bodily wholeness and thus of the subject’s wholeness.[[140]](#endnote-140) At the same time the bit part is whole in itself which is why Freud includes as things that turn something frightening into something uncanny, dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, especially if in addition they prove capable of independent action. [[141]](#endnote-141)

The relationship between the solid body and its negative imprint (which, through a cast, then supplies again a solid) has been described as ‘almost forlorn’. [[142]](#endnote-142) Synonyms for forlorn might be: desolate, lonely, derelict, abandoned, all of which invoke also the uncanny, a connection I want in conclusion to develop by looking at a well-known object, the conjoined hands of poets Robert and Elizabeth Browning (fig 21a). It was perhaps this forlornness that provoked Elizabeth Barrett Browning, while agreeing to allow the sculptor Harriet Hosmer in Rome in 1853 to cast her and her husband’s hands (from which Hosmer subsequently cast the bronze) to make it a condition that Hosmer herself would do all the work. “ ‘Yes’, she said, ‘provided you will cast them, but I will not sit for the formatore’”. [[143]](#endnote-143) In other words, the condition was that no one would touch her actual hand but Hosmer who would herself pour the plaster from which the mould would be made. There would be no nameless Italian artisan to play a part in this drama.[[144]](#endnote-144) It is, as we have seen, not uncommon for the hands of artists and writers to be reproduced in this way whether from life or after death. Elaine Freedgood refers to the way in which in reading about objects as described in Victorian novels the tendency is for the object to be “indentured to the subject”.[[145]](#endnote-145) The Brownings’ hands might accordingly be said to illustrate Victorian interest in writers’ remains or to manifest the collecting policies of the National Portrait Gallery. But neither of these options offers an explanation of what these hands “do” in the dynamics of looking – and touching. Casts of hands are tied into the convention that the *oeuvre* confers immortality after the last mortal breath, and attempts have been made to draw parallels between that immortality and the seemingly natural process of imprint and fossilisation. [[146]](#endnote-146) But the objects that result from these imprints are very far from natural; they involve as I have demonstrated extensive process and agency and they bear the marks of both. By analogy with the immortal corpus that does not, in Samantha Matthew’s words, “obliterate the corpse: the two remain[ing] in a productive correspondence that can endure and even strengthen over time”, [[147]](#endnote-147) casts of hands from the life are (if not Balzac’s “monstrosities”) markers both of the ever presence of death in life and of the curtailment of life.

Bronze as a medium is highly honorific – a monumental medium that will only change colour if exposed to the elements it does not chip or discolour. The Brownings’ hands, which would have been cast separately, are unusual in that they make a total object. Moreover the hollow ends are stopped off and given the appearance of his and hers cuffs with the truncation used for inscriptions, suggestive (as with the baby limbs) of the desire to masque the cut. There is, then, no sense of an inside and an outside even though we know there must be a hollow interior. Although this object is most obviously stable when Elizabeth’s hand lies in Robert’s, if we invert the piece there is a different perspective in which Elizabeth’s hand disappears under the larger hand of her husband (fig 21b). The title under which this piece is generally known, *The Clasped Hands of Mr. and Mrs. Browning*, or *Bronze Cast of Browning’s right hand clasping that of his wife* [[148]](#endnote-148) fails to describe the object accurately or indicate its inherent ambiguity. Especially if viewed, as it were, the “right” way up, that is the way that the object rests most easily on a flat surface, Elizabeth’s hand is simply lying, one might say forlornly, and even her husband’s fingers, gently curled to enclose his wife’s, are exerting no pressure. His index finger is left free.

The ambiguity about right and wrong ways of viewing and handling an in-the-round object – top and bottom, back and front - is a further replay of the negative and positive in which the piece materially originated. That ambiguity is endorsed by the fact that while the inscription ‘copyright’ which appears on Elizabeth’s truncation is legible when the piece is the “right way up”, to read the arguably more significant inscription “HANDS OF ROBERT/ AND ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING/ cast By/ Harriet Hosmer/ Rome 1853” (fig 21c) on the truncation of Robert’s hand, one has to invert the piece. There are other puzzling aspects to this cast: if the hand stands in metonymic relationship to the pen, which is what makes writers’ hands interesting in the first place, the fact that neither (assuming they were right-handed) could write while thus physically in contact is disconcerting, creating tensions in the naturalism of the execution. These hands cannot represent what has been aptly described as embodied tactility that “extends sensation beyond the physical body, through psychic and imaginary spaces”. [[149]](#endnote-149) These hands touch only each other – not the world. Equally troubling is the veristic transmission of the fine details of veins and bones in their mortal detail into the enduring medium of bronze. Veins (blood) and bones (the body’s armature) are here presented, or rather implied, beneath the surface of body parts that, for all the well-versed notion of a communion of souls made popular when this piece was referenced in Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*, are fragmented and disembodied – cut off at the wrist. [[150]](#endnote-150)

In turning to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s work, and especially to the intensely personal and autobiographical collection “Sonnets from the Portuguese,” I do not intend to suggest that one work illustrates the other but rather that we may begin to recognise a structure in which choices about the making process of the hands and the form of the object are uncanny or, in the original unheimlich, or unhomely. The uncanny as a concept is now a familiar part of the analytic apparatus in Art History.[[151]](#endnote-151) However, it is also complicated, especially as heimlich can mean both familiar and agreeable *and* concealed and kept out of sight. What is unheimlich is what ought not to come to light. So unheimlich is in some way or other a species of heimlich (homely). [[152]](#endnote-152) What is valuable here is precisely *not* that the uncanny means what is strange or unfamiliar (which is how it is commonly used) but that it indicates an interdependency in which, for example, there may be doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely whether a lifeless object might not be animate.[[153]](#endnote-153)

Elizabeth had been an invalid for much of her adolescence and remained afflicted by severe ill health for her entire adulthood. She and Browning had been married privately in London in 1846 and fled to Italy to the indignation of her family and the outrage of her father who disinherited her. The first edition of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* was privately printed and circulated in 1847. The writer Edmund Gosse, a friend of Robert Browning, left an account according to which soon after their marriage, Elizabeth Barrett Browning one day came up behind her husband and held him by the shoulder as he stood by a window so he could not turn round and look in her face. In other words she used a hand to communicate rather than words or eyes. At the same time with the other hand she thrust a sheaf of papers into his pocket. The sheaf of papers Elizabeth gave her husband were the manuscript of the so called Portuguese Sonnets, the narrative of which returns repeatedly to her rescue from sickness and death through Robert’s love, her sense of unworthiness, and her terror, “a still renewable fear,” as she describes it, that in the end she may not be able to support this new life in place of familiar death. [[154]](#endnote-154) The Sonnets, as well as some of the later poems of 1850, constantly return to the theme of death as a palpable reality: “If I lay here dead, /Wouldst thou miss any life in losing mine?” she asks [[155]](#endnote-155) The poet envisages herself as a corpse in graphic detail, envisaging even the death weights “darkly on my eyelids,” recalling the blind look of the death mask. [[156]](#endnote-156) She asks her husband “would the sun for thee more coldly shine / Because of grave-damps falling round my head?”[[157]](#endnote-157)

Both Robert Browning’s hand, and the hand with which Elizabeth prevented her husband from seeing her, are strikingly present in these poems. The hand carries the full weight of fear and longing: the particularity of Hosmer’s bronze seems to inflect the ambivalence of a hand given that might be taken away, a touch that is remembered, a proximity that is always endangered. Marriage (axiomatic for homeliness) is symbolised by a woman giving her hand but detached from the body the hand can be fearful and unheimlich as in Wilkie Collins’s story “The Dead Hand” about the hand of a corpse that moves. [[158]](#endnote-158) It is as though the poet sees herself poised between life and death, at a boundary, a threshold, remembering that the ultimate boundary is that passed over in death.

Nevermore

Alone upon the threshold of my door

Of individual life, I shall command

The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand

Serenely in the sunshine as before,

Without the sense of that which I forbore –

Thy touch upon the palm. [[159]](#endnote-159)

The poet’s own hands are forlorn; they are limp (“the poor pale hand”) [[160]](#endnote-160) and incapable of the physical labour of writing that brings us the image of their helplessness. We are reminded of her reluctance to have the strong, shaping hands of the *formatore* come near her. As she reads his letters Elizabeth’s hands are “tremulous” in recalling how Robert Browning came and touched her hand.[[161]](#endnote-161) It is, however, perhaps in the extraordinary image of the penknife (the ‘clasping knife’) and the hand that most powerfully invokes the uncanny. The stanza implores:

Let the world’s sharpness, like a clasping knife,

Shut in upon itself and do no harm

In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm,

And let us hear no sound of human strife

After the click of the shutting. [[162]](#endnote-162)

It is an image that seems to offer reassurance in so far as it contemplates a world in which two people may secure themselves. But this reassurance is then demolished. Let the sharpness do no harm, the poet pleads, but the knife will not shut by itself; it is a thing that is also part of the world of touching whose softness it threatens. And the final line “after the click of the shutting” with its connotations of caesura or, to invoke Barthes, the click of the shutter, is a scarcely veiled allusion to the shutting down of life. [[163]](#endnote-163) If we return to the bronze hands we may observe that the uncanny effect derives from the ambiguity inherent in the comfort of the figurative device of the small hand resting in the larger hand and in the familiar signs of life – veins and bones and fingers that appear to have the capacity to move – articulated in a bodily replica, the wrists of which evince “the click of the shutting”. And the inscriptions only serve to draw attention to the severance. The knife may be shut but the sound of that “click” resonates through both the poem and the bronze. The dismemberment may be dressed up with cuffs but it remains a fearful reminder of the cutting off of life, the deprivation of the lover’s touch that so haunted the poet. The sculpture, itself the product of a repetitious process from creation of plaster mould bearing the imprint of the hand, to bronze cast of which there exist at least five versions and probably many more, reinforces this sense of the uncanny. [[164]](#endnote-164)

We do not know why there are no death masks of Robert and Elizabeth Browning though we do know there were those who found the practice distasteful and resisted it. However, I want to suggest death masks and casts as a shaping presence in some of Elizabeth’s poetry. Elizabeth’s poem “Inclusions” (a significant title given that it implies its opposite, exclusions, the ultimate of which is death) purports to be about giving the hand in marriage, and has a seemingly simple ballad-like construction. But in an invocation of the petrifaction of post-mortem art, Elizabeth’s cheek is white – like plaster of Paris. The face/mask is not merely a symbol for it is “worn, by many a tear run down,” the plaster gouged into rivulets by tears. At the same time her inanimate hand has become a stone under running water, it can only lie there becoming ossified like a cast, a fearful reminder of the deathliness inherent in the reassuring hand-in-hand of wedlock.

Oh, wilt thou have my hand, Dear, to lie

along in thine?

As a little stone in a running stream, it

seems to lie and pine.

Now drop the poor pale hand, Dear, unfit

to plight with thine. [[165]](#endnote-165)

1. Frequently cited sources:

   Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance par Contact: Archéologie, Anachronisme et Modernité de L’Empreinte* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2008).

   Rune Frederiksen and Eckart Marchand, *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting and Displaying from Antiquity to the Present* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2012).

   Emanuelle Héran, ed., *Le Dernier Portrait* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, exhibition catalogue, Musée d’Orsay, 2002).

   I would like to thank the curatorial staff of Edinburgh University Anatomy Museum, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery London, the Royal Academy, Madame Tussaud’s and the Crime Museum New Scotland Yard. I am grateful to Malcolm Baker, Emma Barker, Keren Hammerschlag, Luisa Calè, Mechthild Fend, Alison Goudie, Hanneke Grootenboer, Deborah Lutz, Samantha Matthews, Paolo Palladino, Marc De La Ruelle, Aris Sarafianos and Agnieszka B. Whelan for inspiring conversations and invaluable advice as well as the two anonymous *Art Bulletin* readers for their constructive criticisms. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise indicated. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Paul Wilson, “Václav Havel (1936-2011),” *The New York Review of Books*, LIX:2 (9 February 2012), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The literature on the cultural practices surrounding death and memory is now vast. Of particular note are: Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: ritual and representation*, (London: British Museum, 1999) and Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 147. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The cast directly from a dead individual’s face - the matrix from which copies are subsequently made - sometimes survives but generally it is casts after the mask that are preserved. Hence the objects are described as ‘cast after death mask,’ However, except when (as in the case of John Constable, fig 15a) a hair is preserved which would probably have been lost in subsequent casting, or when there is documentary evidence as with Archbishop Campbell Tait (fig 14a) the only way of gauging how remote from the original a cast may be is from the general impression of sharpness of features. In this paper I refer to all casts after the faces of dead people (whether matrix or replica) as death masks as that is how they were (and often still are) described. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See, for example, Iris I.J.M. Gibson, “Death Masks Unlimited,”*British Medical Journal* 291 (21-28 December 1985): 1785-1787; M.H. Kaufman and Robert McNeil, “Death Masks and Life Masks at Edinburgh University,” *British Medical Journal* 298 (25 February 1989): 506-507. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Frederiksen and Marchand, introduction, observe that in 2006 the Metropolitan Museum of Art sold the remains of a plaster cast collection that was once its pride and joy. At the same time new interest in the histories of reception and collecting, education and a wider recognition of the appeal of such objects “when dramatically displayed” has led to a revival of interest among scholars. However, the contributors to their book barely spare a thought for the death mask. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Medievalists have long been interested in the material culture of death but see, for example, at time of writing: “The Materials of Mourning”, conference at University of York, UK, 3 December 2011; “Art and Death” workshop series, the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 2012-13; “In memory of … Death and the Technological Afterlife”, Southeastern College Art Conference, Durham, NC, October 2012; “Death and Dying” symposium, the University of Houston October 2012; “Transmortale IV” conference, Kassel Museum/Institüt fur Sepulkalkutur 23 January 2013; “Art and Death” workshop, Kings College London 13 February 2013; University of Bath, Centre for Death and Society; regular announcements of academic events related to the totentanz on <http://www.h-arthist.net> (eg “Der Berliner Tötentanz”, Humboldt University 15-18 September 2011; “Töten. Darstellbarkeit eines Prozesses?” University of Köln, 7 October 2011), and the European Totentanz network <http://www.totentanz-online.de/totentanz.php>. The exhibition “Death: A Self-Portrait” was at the Wellcome Collection, London, 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Among those who have led this movement have been notably Bill Brown, eg “Thing Theory,” in Things, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 1-24 and Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things that Talk: Object Lessons in Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004). Evidence of the pervasiveness of interest in material culture as an organising disciplinary principle is to be found, for example, in the second year of open seminars at the University of Cambridge under the title *Things: Early Modern Culture* <http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/page/1036/things-material-cultures-.htm>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Among many examples that one might cite are Jonathan Lamb’s book *The Things Things Say* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011) in which he explores “it” narratives in which property declares its independence of its owners; the whole of the special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45:1 (Fall 2011) “The Disorder of Things” and especially Luisa Calè’s essay “Gray’s ode and Walpole’s China Tub: The Order of the Book and the Paper Lives of an Object” in that issue; *The Material Renaissance*, Michelle O’Malley and Evelyn Welch eds., (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) in which “material” is largely focused on expenditure, acquisition, and social relations. On the other hand, studies like Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007) have been enormously important for our understanding of the relationship between things and their representations way beyond the areas of science that are their focus. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. For this see Moshe Barasch, “The Mask in European Art: Meanings and Functions” in Moshe Barasch and Lucy Freeman Sandler, eds., *Art the Ape of Nature: Studies in Honor of H.W. Janson* (New York: Harry Abrams Inc. 1981); Robin Cormack, *Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks, and Shrouds* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997); Héran, *Dernier Portrait*. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The most authoritative account of *imagines maiorum* is found in Harriet I. Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1996). Flower draws attention (ch. 2) to the considerable uncertainties surrounding both terminology and the exact physical nature of *imagines* for which we lack both examples and direct testimony. It is important to note that, according to Flower, Polybius (one of the main sources of evidence) makes no connection with any death mask, even as a prototype or artist’s model (38). For the significance of the tradition of ancestor masks for Renaissance sculpture see Peter Blome, “Die *imagines maiorum*: ein Problemfall römischer und neuzeitlicher Asthetik,” in Gottfried Boehm, ed., *Homo Pictor* (München and Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance*, 76-77. This scholar makes much of Pliny’s description in Book 35 of his Natural History but his anti-Vasarian polemic (proposing a cleavage between the figurative arts as material practice and aestheticized activity removed from manual labour) ignores the historical nuances and the uncertainties highlighted by Flower. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Jennifer Woodward, *The Theatre of Death: the Ritual Management of Royal Funerals in Renaissance England, 1570-1625* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), 88, 204. See also Ralph E. Giesey, *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France* (Geneva: Droz, 1960); Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); The seminal study is Julius von Schlosser, *Tote Blicke: Geschichte der Porträtbildbnerei in Wachs. Ein Versuch* (1910-11), Thomas Medicus, ed. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993) available in English in Roberta Panzanelli, ed., *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For surviving examples see Anthony Harvey and Richard Mortimer, eds., *The Funeral Effigies of Westminster Abbey* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. There are various putative casts after Cromwell’s death mask, eg wax and lacking the famous wart, taken after the corpse had been embalmed, formerly collection Sir Hans Sloane (British Museum SLMisc.2010); plaster (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge M.2 & A-1912). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Newton’s death mask see Scott Mandelbrote, *Footprints of the Lion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Library, 2001.

    According to Ernst Benkard, *Das ewige Antlitz: Eine Sammlung von Totenmasken* (Berlin: Frankfurter Verlags-Austalt, 1926), 33 it was Mirabeau’s death (1791) when citizens required a commemoration worthy of a secular saint that the example of Newton was recalled. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Madame Tussaud’s, London (now owned by Merlin Entertainments Group) has few death masks originally owned by Tussaud; most were probably destroyed in the fire of 1925 or in wartime bombing. The archivist is currently compiling a list of those once owned by the museum (personal communication). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Héran, *Dernier Portrait*, 28, 34-38. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine,* (Cambridge: Mass, MIT Press), 117. For studies of phrenology as popular science see Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Jan Van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Stephen Tomlinson, *Head Masters: Phrenology, Secular Education, and Nineteenth-Century Social Thought* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005). None of these studies despite including a few illustrations, addresses the role of visual and material aids in the dissemination of phrenology. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. The invention of lithography and its extensive use for disseminating images cheaply during the nineteenth century enabled phrenologists to further replicate and advertise death masks. The Wellcome Library owns several such lithographs. In Talleyrand (28169), lithographed by Moritz Krautz, the head is in profile and the back has clearly been added. With Martin a parricide (28231i) the representation of the death mask has been cut out and pasted onto board for display purposes and the phrenological lines introduced by the lithographer. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Officially named the Crime Museum it is not open to the public. The text accompanying *Sketches in Newgate: the Collection of Casts* states: “This exhibition is one that might well be discontinued, we think.” *Illustrated London News* (15 February 1873): 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *Death Masks and Life Masks of the Famous and Infamous* (Edinburgh: Scotland’s Cultural Heritage Unit and the Department of Anatomy, University of Edinburgh, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance*, 99, asserts that the only difference between a life mask and a death mask is the breathing tubes. Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) includes photographs of masks from the Warren Anatomical Museum, Harvard, which he describes as life masks but which as they represent subjects allegedly executed for rape must surely be death masks. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Jeremy Stubbs, “Surrealism and the Death Mask” in Martin Crowley, ed., *Dying Words: the Last Moments of Writers and Philosophers* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 69-93. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Philippe Ariès *The Hour of Our Death* (1977) (New York: Albert A. Knopf, Inc., 1981), 126-127, introduces the idea that death masks originate in the desire for a resemblance rather than a *memento mori* and are thus close to portrait photography. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. The sculptor, Thomas Woolner, records the terror of geologist Adam Sedgwick when attending the artist’s studio to have his bust made; he thought he would have to lie on the floor and have liquid plaster poured over his face. Amy Woolner, *Thomas Woolner, R.A., His Life and Letters* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1917), 187. There is an illustration of the process in Cennino Cennini’s *Il Libro dell’Arte* (*The Craftsman’s Handbook*), Daniel V. Thompson, Jr. trans. (1933) (New York: Dover, 1954), 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon, Historical Painter, from His Autobiography and Journals, edited and compiled by Tom Taylor* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1853), i, 136-138. Edouard Dantan’s *Une Moulage sur Nature* (1887, Göteborgs Konstmuseum) shows a far more benign scene. The process is discussed in detail by Jean-François Corpataux, “Live Body Moulding and Maternal Devotion in Marcello’s Studio,” in Rune Frederickson and Eckart Marchand eds., *Plaster Casts*, 307-318. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ronald R. Grimes, “Masking: Towards a Phenomenology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 43:3 (September 1975): 509. The point about the prototype is referenced from Andreas Lommel, *Masks: their Meaning and Function* (1970) Nadia Fowler, trans. (London: Paul Elek Books, 1972). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* in *Stories by Honoré de Balzac*, (London and Edinburgh: T.C. and E.C. Jack, 1909), 8. Didi-Huberman discusses the mortiferous nature of the imprints, *La Ressemblance*, 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *L’Empreinte,* sous la direction de Georges Didi-Huberman (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1997), 73. In addition to this prelude to *La Ressemblance* Didi-Huberman published an essay in English exploring the significance of the imprint as an anachronistic form, “The Molding Image,” in Costas Douzinas and Lynda Nead, eds., *Law and the Image: the Authority of Art and the Aesthetics of Law* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 71-87. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Among classic texts is Boris Arvatov’s 1920s Marxist essay “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question),”

    Christina Kiaer, trans., *October*, 81 (Summer 1997): 119-128. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Anne Pingeot, “Têtes Coupées” in *Le Corps en Morceaux* (Paris: Musée d’Orsay: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1999), 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. R.T.T., “Undying Faces by Ernst Benkard,” *The Burlington Magazine*, 55: 318 (September 1929): 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. According to the Portrait Gallery’s registered papers, the mask was made in three parts (the face and two sides) after a post mortem that did not include the cranium and was then incorporated into a bust using a torso that was not Johnson’s. The bust is discussed by Helen Deutsch, *Loving Dr. Johnson* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2005), 51-2: William Cumberland Cruikshank supervised the taking of the death mask and was responsible for the head (or more likely the face) and then the sculptor James Hoskins transformed it into a bust. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Most commonly death masks are given the appearance of marble. However, some are given flesh tones through the use of balsam copaiba, which later turns brown. This is the case with that of Jonathan Swift, T.G. Wilson, “The Death-Masks of Dean Swift,” *Medical History*, 4:i (January 1960): 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. There are many representations of artists’ studios showing death masks among the casts, most famously Adolf Menzel’s *View of the Atelier*, 1872, Hamburg: Kunsthalle. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Reproduced in Von Schlosser, *Tote Blicke*, 65. This and other Renaissance examples are widely discussed, eg by Eric MacLagen, “The Use of Death Masks by Florentine Sculptors,” *The Burlington Magazine*, 43:249 (December 1923): 303-4; Hans Belting, “Repräsentation und Anti-Repräsentation: Grab und Porträt in der Frühen Neuzeit”, in Hans Belting, Dietmar Kamper and Martin Schulz, eds., *Quel Corps? Eine Frage der Repräsentation* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002), 29-52; Andrea Klier, *Fixierte Natur: Naturabgus und Effigies im 16 Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Czartoryska’s bust was in the Gothic house at her country palace Puławy which became a museum of Polish memorabilia after the partition of 1795. These collections are now at Szcecin but the bust is reproduced in Zdzisław Źygulski, *Dzieje zbiorów puławskich: Świątynia Sybilli i Dom Gotycki* (Kraków: Fundacja Ksiąźąt Czartoryskich, 2009). Michael Hertl, *Totenmasken: Was vom Leben und Sterben Bleibt* (Stuttgart: Thorbecke Verlag, 2002) reproduces (44a) a death mask of an organ builder inserted into the wall of a building now a garden café in Hamburg. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. *The Argus* (Melbourne 14 April 1928) 27. The building, construction of which MacKenzie supervised, is now the Australian National Film and Sound Archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. There is a considerable literature on this topic, see especially Héran, *Dernier Portrait* and Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: death and photography in America* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Further modern examples include Berthold Brecht (d. 1956) Royal Library Copenhagen, Sir Edward Lutyens (d. 1944), Sir Maurice Bowra (d. 1971) National Portrait Gallery. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. According to Mechthild Fend, the heyday of dermatological moulages was ca. 1850 to ca. 1950, “Contagious Contacts: the dermatological moulage as indexical image” (paper delivered to the Modèles Anatomiques conference, Académie de Médecine, Paris, 4 April 2013); for a detailed discussion of these wax moulages see Mary Hunter, “ ‘Effroyable realism’: Wax, Femininity, and the Madness of Realist Fantasies,” *RACAR*, XXXIII, 1-2, (2008): 43-58. The *locus classicus* for wax portraiture remains Von Schlosser, *Tote Blicke*. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Louis Kaplan, “Photograph/Death Mask: Jean Luc Nancy’s Recasting of the Photographic Image”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 9:45 (2010) 46 quoting Nancy. Bazin’s realism, according to Kaplan (47-8) asserts the automatic and mechanical nature of the medium that leaves the human hand completely out of the picture in its reproduction of reality (André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *Film Quarterly*, 13:4 (1960): 4-9). Note, however, that according Hélène Pinet, in “Mains”, *Le Corps en Morceaux*, 194, Bazin made the point that both casts from nature and photography “fixent … ‘les apparences charnelles de l’être’” as early as 1945. It is echoed by Barthes in his insistence that the power of the photographic image stems from the fact that it is “literally an emanation of the referent”, Roland Barthes , *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980) (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 80; Sontag is described by Kaplan as continuing the same rhetoric that privileges photography over painting on account of an indexical ontology, and she invokes the same analogy with the death mask, Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday) 1977, 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Kaplan, “Photograph/Death Mask,” 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Kaplan, 47. Pogue Harrison *Dominion,*147 also offers this as a precedent. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. See Katharina Sykora, “Schillers Schädel: Totenmaskenfotografie zwischen virtuellem Pantheon und Anthropometrie,” in: Katharina Ferus and Dietmar Rübel, eds., “*Die Tücke des Objekts”: Vom Umgang mit Dingen* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2008), 26-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Didi-Huberman, *Ressemblance*, 59: “une resemblance par contact garante de vie outré-tombe pour le visage du mort.” [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Didi-Huberman, *Ressemblance* 61-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. “O ne peut comprendre ce phénomène … qu’en le situant dans le jeu complexe d’une structure sociale ou se gèrent la ressemblance et la ‘réproduction humaine’ entre contact et aspect, relique et effigie, gestation symbolique des morts et gestation symbolique du vivant, deuil et désir’, Didi-Huberman, *Ressemblance*,9 8-99. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. There is a growing literature on waxworks. See, for example, Uta Kornmeier, “Madame Tussaud’s as a popular pantheon” in Matthew Craske and Richard Wrigley, eds., *Pantheons: Transformations of a Monumental Idea* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 210-34 and “ ‘Almost Alive’: Verisimilitude and the Pleasure of Recognition” in Panzanelli, ed., *Ephemeral Bodies* 67-81; Lucia Dacome “Women, Wax and Anatomy in the ‘Century of Things’ ,” *Renaissance Studies*, 21/4 (2007) 522–550; Rose Marie San Juan, “The Horror of Touch: Anna Morandi’s Wax Models of Hands,” *Oxford Art Journal*, 34:3 (2011): 433-447. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. It has been suggested that the photograph may show the sculptor William Ordway Partridge, who is known to have used death masks, and his occasional assistant Lee Oscar Lawrie. I am grateful to Michael L. Carlebach for bringing to my attention his *Bain’s New York: the City in News Pictures 1900-1925* (New York: Dover, 2012). According to Barbara Natanson, Library of Congress (personal communication), Bain also collected photographs from other sources. It is therefore possible that this photograph represents a studio in Paris or London rather than in New York. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Benkard, *Das ewige Antlitz* . Richard Langer’s *Totenmasken* was published in 1927 (Leipzig: Thieme) and Egon Friedell, *Das letzte Gesicht* (*The last Face*) in 1929. According to Emanuel Alloa it influenced among others Céline, Canetti, Aragon and Nabokov, “Bare Exteriority: Philosophy of the Image and the Image in Philosophy in Martin Heidegger and Maurice Blanchot,” Millay Hyatt, trans., *COLLOQUY text, theory, critique*, 10 (2005): 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Alloa, “Bare Exteriority,” 70. Benkard’s text establishes a mystical approach to the death mask. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Benkard, *Das ewige Antlitz*, 33. See also Hans W. Gruhle, introduction to Langer, *Totenmasken*, the opening sentence of which reads: “Das Gesicht des Menschen ist ein Spiegle seiner Leidenschaften” (The face of mankind is a mirror of his suffering). Adhering to this tradition whilst adding considerable empirical data is the survey of death masks by Hertl, *Totenmasken*, 84: “Eine Totenmasken spricht …” (a death mask speaks). Hertl usefully discusses the technicalities of taking imprints from the recently dead and is unique in asking the question why there are so few death masks of women but his book is a fine art production with high quality frontal photographs of death masks floating on a grey ground, organized as a gallery by type in the manner of Benkard. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Sarah E. James “A Socialist Realist Sander? Comparative Portraiture as a Marxist Model in the German Democratic Republic”, *Grey Room* 47: (Spring 2012) 39; the reviewer was Alfred Döblin, “Faces, Images and Their Truth,” in *Face of Our Time: Sixty Portraits of Twentieth-Century Germans* (1929) (Munich: Schirmer, 2003) 9. The portraits were by August Sander [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. The collection was later published in West Germany, Rudolf Schäfer, *Der ewige Schlaf: Visages de Morts* (Hamburg: Kellner Verlag, 1989); James, “Socialist Realist,” 38-59. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Jean-Luc Nancy in “Masked Imagination” in *The Ground of the Image,* Jeff Fort, trans (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) engages with the Marburg lectures in which Heidegger explored the metaphysics of presence. The Heidegger text is Martin Heidegger, *Logik: Die Frage nach der Wahrheit*, Gesamtausgabe, xxi, 1925/26 (Frankfurt/M: Klostermann, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Nancy, “Masked Imagination,” 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Kaplan, “Photograph/Death Mask,” 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Nancy, “Masked Imagination,” 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Hanneke Grootenboer, *Treasuring the Gaze, Intimate Vision in Late Eighteenth-Century Eye Miniatures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. The most pervasive is that of a beautiful and unknown young woman whose body was retrieved from the Seine in the late 1880s and whose striking looks motivated an assistant at the Paris morgue to make a death mask. Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 205-208. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Admittedly it would need a DNA test to ascertain that the hair was his and not that of a *formatore* – but it would have been very careless on the part of a professional caster to have permitted his own hair into the mould. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. See for example Justin Paton, *Jude Rae* (Auckland: Ouroborus, 2006), 77-86. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 14-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. See Nicholas Penny, “Sculpture and Privacy” in Peter Parshall ed., *The Darker Side of Light: Arts of Privacy 1850-1900* (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art and Lund Humphries 2009), 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. http://www.lorenzi.fr/ [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. See Peter Malone, “How the Smiths Made a Living” in Fredericksen and Marchand, *Plaster Casts*, 121-142. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Death mask of Archbishop Campbell Tait and Earl of Beaconsfield, National Portrait Gallery, London 2352 and 2655; correspondence about Glassby, Heinz Archive, National Portrait Gallery. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Excerpted from Rossetti’s mother’s diary, William Michael Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti* (London: Brown, Langham, 1906), 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. M.H. Kaufman and N. Basden, “Marked Phrenological Heads,” *Journal of the History of Collections*, 9:1 (1997): 139-159. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Account Book of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society, 1820-1870, MS. Edinburgh University Library E62/48, Gen. 608/18 (hereafter Account Book); *Phrenology*, *Luke O’Neil & Son* *Statuaries* (Edinburgh: N. Johnston, 1823). [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. On artists and phrenologists see Fiona Pearson, “Phrenology and Sculpture 1820-1855,” *Leeds Arts Calendar* 88 (1981)14-23; Joan K. Stemmler, “The Physiognomical Portraits of Johann Caspar Lavater,”  *Art Bulletin* 75:1 (March 1993): 151-168. Names of artists given in the Account Book. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. See, however, Terry Friedman’s article on Samuel Joseph in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and Fiona Pearson, “Phrenology and Sculpture”. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Obituary in *Phrenological Journal* 19 (1846): 329-44, cited Cooter, *Cultural Meaning*, 279-80 who uses the spelling Deville but *Outlines of Phrenology as an Accompaniment to the Phrenological Bust* was published in London in 1824 by J. De Ville. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. He also published several books including *Syllabus of Six Lectures on Plaster and Wax casting &c …*, (Liverpool, np, 1833). See Roger Cooter, *Phrenology in the British Isles: An Annotated, Historical, Biobibliography and Index* (Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press Inc.), 1989, 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Thanks to Katie Scott for allowing me to read a chapter from her forthcoming book on the copy. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Filippo Brunelleschi, d. 1446, Florence: Museo dell’opera del Duomo; Lorenzo de’ Medici, d. 1492, Forence: Pitti Palace, both reproduced in Héran, *Dernier Portrait*. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Harry Berger, Jr., *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt against the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford: CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Berger, *Fictions*, 226. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Berger, *Fictions*, 509. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. See Isabel Moore, *Talks in a Library with Laurence Hutton* (New York and London: G.P.Putnam’s Sons, 1905),189 for an authoritative view on this. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. *Times* (6 April 1934) cutting, Heinz Archive, National Portrait Gallery, London. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. Letter from Tussaud, Heinz Archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1955), Harry Zohn trans. (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1970). [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant Garde,” *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press: 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Didi-Huberman, *Ressemblance*, 36, 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Didi-Huberman, *Ressemblance* 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) (London: Penguin Books, 2001),” 122-126. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. On Whiteread’s use of casting technology see Sue Malvern, “Outside In: the after-life of the plaster cast in contemporary culture” in Rune Fredericksen and Eckart Marchand, *Plaster Casts*, 351-358; Lisa Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago and London: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 81-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Quoted Benkard, *Das ewige Antlitz*, 43-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Pogue Harrison, *Dominion*, 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. See, for example, Joanna Wojtkowiak, “The Postself and the body in the process of dying” in Marius Rotar and Marina Sozzi, eds., *Proceedings of the Dying and Death in 18th-21st century Europe International Conference*, Romania, 2008 (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Accent, 2009), 41-49. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. See Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (London and New Haven, 1993), ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, Leon S. Roudiez, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press 1982), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, Kathryn Cave, ed. (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982): 15 March 1806, 2693. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. For a discussion of likeness, see John Gage, “Photographic Likeness,” Joanna Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 121 [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. *Farington Diary*, 23 May 1812, 4130. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. *Farington Diary*, 17 May 1806, 2763. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. Daily telegraph (21 November 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. *The History of Charles XII King of Sweden in Eight Books* (1732) (London for C. Hitch, 1739), 160; *Histoire de Charles XII, roi de Suéde* par Mr. de V\*\*\* (Basle: chez C. Revis, 1731). [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. Maria Edgeworth to C. Sneyd Edgeworth 1 May 1813, Maria Edgeworth, *Letters from England 1813-1844*, Christina Colvin, ed., (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. *Farington Diary*, 19 September 1806, 2853. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. Edgeworth, *Letters*, 34. Two casts from the death mask of Charles XII of Sweden are now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (M.21A-1938 and M21B-1947). [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. The account, based on contemporary sources, is in Mark Stocker, *Royalist and Realist. The Life and Work of Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm* (New York and London: Garland, 1988), 46, Appendix F. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Mary Carlyle to J.E. Boehm, Cheyne Row, 7 February 1881, MS. Beinecke Library, transcript Heinz Archive, National Portrait Gallery. [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. The hands were cast separately but in such a way that they may be moved around and arranged to lie together, enabling thus an interaction between viewer and object. There is a cast in Carlyle’s House; that in the National Portrait Gallery is inscribed “Brucciani & Co”. It is thought the former was made by J.E. Boehm who may have sold the copyright to Brucciani. See Stocker, *Royalist and Realist*. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. Lord Davidson of Lambeth to the Director of the National Portrait Gallery, 17 November 1928, Heinz Archive, National Portrait Gallery. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
110. Mark Stocker in “Boehm, Joseph Edgar,” Oxford Art Online. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
111. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Helene Iswolsky trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 410. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
112. Sykora, “Schillers Schädel,” 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. There were also plaster casts of crania glazed and marked up with regions of the brain, M.H. Kaufman and N. Basden, “Marked Phrenological Heads,” *Journal of the History of Collections*, 9:1 (1997): 140, 152. Collections containing substantial numbers of death masks include Princeton University Library, Edinburgh University Medical School which has what survives of the collections of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society (ca. 240 of over 350) and the National Portrait Gallery, London. Some of the masks on which Benkard based *Das ewige Antlitz* are in the Schiller Museum, Marburg. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. 23-25 Chambers Street is now the Crown Office. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
115. Account Book. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
116. A relationship between the morphology of the skull and human character was first proposed by Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828). It was disseminated particularly in the USA and Britain by Johann Spurzhein (1776-1832). A key proponent was the Scot George Combe (1788-1858). [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
117. Kaufman and Basden, 149 reproduce a cranium of this kind in the collection of the Anatomy Museum, the Georg-August University of Göttingen. [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
118. Anatomy Museum, University of Edinburgh, section XVI. An entry in the Account Book 15 November 1824 reads: “Pd carriage from London of Esquimaux skull”. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
119. Dr. Lucy Peltz, curator of eighteenth-century collections (personal communication). The Head of Collections has been unable to tell me when or by whom these boxes were made. [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
120. Account Book. [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
121. Today they are kept on shelves with their original labels and in something like their original order by racial type in a galleried room off the Anatomy. [↑](#endnote-ref-121)
122. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 5 scene 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-122)
123. Robert Cox, “On the Character and Cerebral Development of the Esqimaux,” *Phrenological Journal*, 8 (1832-4): xxxvii, 289-308; xxvii: 424-437. Cox may have been responsible also for “Character of the Esquimaux,” *Medico-Chirugical Journal and Review*, NS 19 (October 1833): 474-7; both listed in Cooter, *Phrenology in the British Isles,* 260.2; 761.2*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-123)
124. Sigmund Freud, “A Note on the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’ (1925), *The Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Strachey, ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1962) XIX, 227. Freud invokes a child’s toy, the Wunderblock, involving a stylus and a wax pad that enabled inscriptions to be preserved long after they had apparently been erased from its surface. [↑](#endnote-ref-124)
125. Letter from the donors to the National Portrait Gallery, 7 October 1911, Heinz Archive, National Portrait Gallery. The donors were the daughters of Lawrence’s executors. The brass handles were left behind and sent on later. [↑](#endnote-ref-125)
126. Quoted in Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 2006), 144 and passim. [↑](#endnote-ref-126)
127. National Portrait Gallery, 1634a. [↑](#endnote-ref-127)
128. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-128)
129. “Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art,” Theodor Adorno, “Valéry-Proust Museum” (1967) in Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, Samuel and Shierry Weber, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-129)
130. Jonathan Marsden, ed., *Victoria and Albert: Art and Love* (London: Royal Collections Publications, 2010), 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-130)
131. Additionally there is 34731 Arm of Gaston d’Orleans, Comte d’Eu and

     52343 Arm of an unidentified child. Information from Kathryn Jones, Royal Collections. All but two, which are at Frogmore, are at Osborne House; seven are by Mary Thornycroft, three by Abraham Kent, the rest by an unknown artist. [↑](#endnote-ref-131)
132. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 339, quoting an English sculptor who visited Rodin’s studio. By contrast, H.W. Janson, “Realism in Sculpture: Limits and Limitations” in Gabriel P. Weisberg, ed., *The European Realist Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 298 states that Rodin disapproved of life casts. [↑](#endnote-ref-132)
133. Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 339. [↑](#endnote-ref-133)
134. The death of a loved child is a haunting theme in Victorian literature, as most famously with the death of Paul Dombey in Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1848). [↑](#endnote-ref-134)
135. This structure of the fetish originates with Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism” (1927), *The Standard Edition*, XXVII (1927-1931) 353. [↑](#endnote-ref-135)
136. Although there are great differences in the material discussed I am indebted here to San Juan, “The Horror of Touch”. [↑](#endnote-ref-136)
137. The point about child sitters is made by Janson, “Realism in Sculpture,” 296. [↑](#endnote-ref-137)
138. The term “replica” is used by English Heritage the current custodians. [↑](#endnote-ref-138)
139. http://www.imagecasting.co.uk/ [↑](#endnote-ref-139)
140. See Jacques Lacan, “The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience,” in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (1966), Alan Sheridan trans., (London:Tavistock, 1977). [↑](#endnote-ref-140)
141. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919) *The Standard Edition*, XVII (1917-1919) 366. [↑](#endnote-ref-141)
142. Didi-Huberman, *L’Empreinte*, quoted in Stubbs, “Surrealism and the Death Mask,” 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-142)
143. *Harriet Hosmer: Letters and Memoirs*, Cornelia Carr, ed. (London: John Lane. The Bodley Head 1913), 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-143)
144. Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection*, 324-6 claims that Hosmer was influenced by Phrenology. [↑](#endnote-ref-144)
145. Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-145)
146. Stubbs, “Surrealism and the Death Mask,” 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-146)
147. Samantha Matthews, *Poetical Remains: Poets’ Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-147)
148. The latter is the National Portrait Gallery title, see Richard Ormond, *Early Victorian Portraits* (London: HMSO, 1973), 3165; the Metropolitan Museum titles it “Clasped Hands of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning,” (1986.52). [↑](#endnote-ref-148)
149. San Juan, “The Horror of Touch,” 439. The substantial literature on the hand in relation to the sense of touch concentrates on early modern Europe, see for example, Elizabeth Harvey, *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-149)
150. “…the individuality and heroic union of two high poetic lives,” Nathanial Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun: Or, The Romance of Monte Beni* (1860), quoted in *Harriet Hosmer*, 92. Michele Martinez refers to “a ghostly omnipotent third,” “Sister Arts and Artists: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* and the Life of Harriet Hosmer”, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 39:2 (April 2003): 219. [↑](#endnote-ref-150)
151. For example, Margaret Iversen’s analysis of Edward Hopper in *Beyond Pleasure: Freud Lacan Barthes* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), ch. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-151)
152. Freud, “Uncanny,” 347. [↑](#endnote-ref-152)
153. Freud here draws on the 1906 work of Ernst Jentsch, Freud, “Uncanny,” 347. [↑](#endnote-ref-153)
154. “Sonnets from the Portuguese” in *The Complete Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Boston and New York: Houghton Miffin Co. 1900),xxviii. [↑](#endnote-ref-154)
155. “Sonnets,” xxiii. [↑](#endnote-ref-155)
156. “Sonnets,” ii. [↑](#endnote-ref-156)
157. “Sonnets,” xxiii [↑](#endnote-ref-157)
158. Wilkie Collins, “The Dead Hand” in Wilkie Collins, *Tales of Suspense*, Robert Ashley and Herbert van Thal, eds. (London: Folio Society, 1954), 102-122. [↑](#endnote-ref-158)
159. “Sonnets,” vi [↑](#endnote-ref-159)
160. “Inclusions”, stanza i, “Poems of 1850” in *The Complete Poetical Works*. [↑](#endnote-ref-160)
161. “Sonnets,” xxviii. [↑](#endnote-ref-161)
162. “Sonnets,” xxiv. [↑](#endnote-ref-162)
163. “I love these mechanical sounds in an almost voluptuous way, as if, in the Photograph, they were the very thing – and the only thing – to which my desire clings, their abrupt click breaks through the mortiferous layer of the Pose.” Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-163)
164. See Richard Ormond, *Early Victorian Portraits.* It is not known how many Hosmer produced. H.W. Janson, “Realism in Sculpture” ,297 suggests there are hundreds. [↑](#endnote-ref-164)
165. “Inclusions”, stanza i, “Poems of 1850” in *The Complete Poetical Works*. [↑](#endnote-ref-165)