DON LAVIGNE – ARCHAEOLOGICAL EPIGRAM

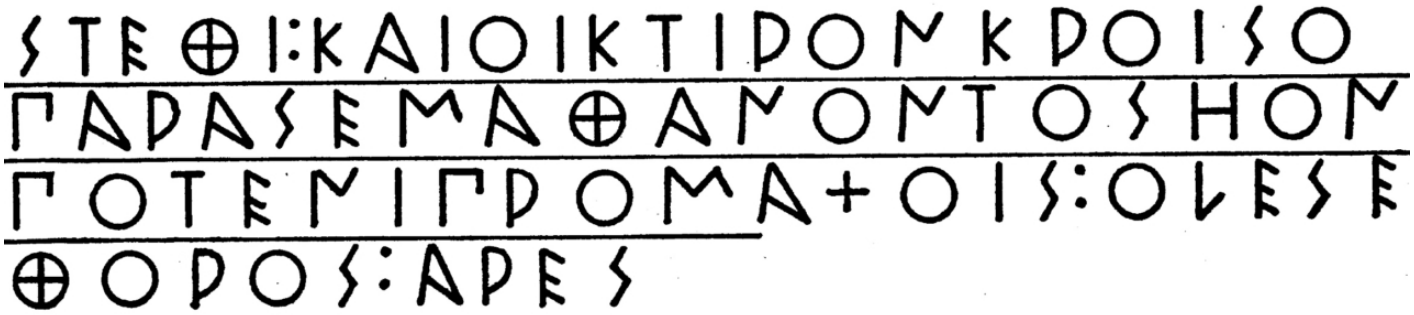
Epigram – a concept

Don Lavigne was on campus last Friday (Nov 21) to give what was a fascinating talk about ancient Greek epigram – short texts inscribed on something, typically a stone, base, offering, tomb, votive dedication, statue.

Don didn't offer a philological account of epigrams simply as texts. Instead he

explored a media ecology – interrogating epigram as a particular kind of media performance.

Epigram – acts of writing upon something placed somewhere. Let me explore the archaeological aspects of this particular definition of epigram.



Here's an epigram inscribed on the pedestal base of a statue, over a grave, from Attica – 6th century BCE. It reads:
"Stop and show pity beside the marker (sēma – "sign") of Kroisos, dead, whom, when he was in the front ranks, raging Ares destroyed"

Epigram – an archaeological concept

What happens in epigram?

Epigram involves a poetics of presence. An inscription makes a statement. It is anchored, spatially, in that upon which it is inscribed. The stone speaks. It's often deictic – stop, look, I'm here. Performative – the inscription doesn't just tell you something, it commands attention – "stop, look, take heed", blending object and gesture (look, touch, remember, retell). The inscription connects the stone, through the statement, to the passer-by, and to a referent beyond, a person and their deeds perhaps, in the example I just gave, a hero struck down in the front rank. The inscription invokes, evokes that absent person and event – it is a trace of that person before you now; it is their mark, as well as that of the mason who cut the letters in the stone. The epigram is a lapidary fragment – a voice that a thing gives to itself – a speaking object. A self-conscious object – aware about its own status as a material trace. In calling to you the epigram needs your help to complete the bridging of past, present, and future by reading into the inscription, drawing inferences from the short-form fragment, connecting it to its location here before you, connecting it to the statue, and re-collecting, taking the memory with you.

What is archaeological about epigram?

Such a poetics of presence is profoundly archaeological. The epigram is a manifestation of an archaeological sensibility.

An archaeological sensibility is attuned to material traces, pasts-in-the-present, ruins, remains, memories. The archaeological imagination involves the mobilization of an archaeological sensibility, animating the archive, working with remains, attending to what is addressed to us across time. Key characteristics of an archaeological field or circuit are turbulent temporalities of passing-on and loss, entropy and ruin, enduring materiality and the return of what was, when the haunting past-in-the-present, the interrupting actuality of memory, prompts connection, between then and now, under a disposition of care (one attends to certain pasts out of responsibility, concern and care for the future).

Epigram was from its inception a shaping of the encounter between object, observer, and event. Concise, situated, and materially anchored, epigram anticipates the conceptual dispositions of archaeology, animating what remains.

Host–Ghost–Visitor: the dramaturgy of epigram

The scenario of the epigram is performative – it is a theatre/archaeology – a re-articulation of remains as real-time event.

Epigram involves a triadic, dramatic and scenographic relationship of host–ghost–visitor. The stone stele, altar, pedestal, functions as host, a material frame that invites and structures encounter. The voice that speaks from the inscription is the ghost – the dead, the absent, the dedicant – addressing the living with startling immediacy: “Stranger, stand…”, “I am the tomb…”, “Go tell…”. The passer-by is visitor, summoned into a brief but intense relation with both material presence and remembered life.

Epigram stages these roles with extraordinary economy. The stone hosts; the inscribed voice haunts; the reader visits. This choreography is not an interpretive overlay but built into the form itself. The visitor completes the meaning of the epigram by performing the prescribed gesture of attention; the ghost is animated through reading; the host-object mediates between worlds. In these small, ritualized encounters we find an ancient prototype of the relational work

archaeology performs: negotiating between matter, memory, and presence through a sequence of roles distributed across human and nonhuman participants.

Figure–Ground Reversal: the speaking object and the art of attention

Epigram relies on a deliberate figure–ground inversion fundamental to archaeological vision. In most situations, the object is ground and the viewer is figure – the active perceiver against a passive backdrop. But in epigram, the stone or object becomes figure, speaking in the first person; the viewer becomes ground, addressed, positioned, choreographed.

This inversion trains a specific kind of attention. Epigram asks us to look not “through” the stone to a meaning beyond it, but at the stone as an active agent. The inscription has no meaning outside its material emplacement. This figure–ground fluidity mirrors archaeological inquiry, where interpretation oscillates continually between object and context, surface and depth, presence and absence. Epigram teaches the reader to inhabit this oscillation, to withdraw assumptions about who or what speaks, and to let the object come forward as agent.

Epigram – riddle-figures in presence-absence

Here are some cases that came to mind during Don’s talk.

In Nicolas Poussin's 1637-8 painting *Les bergers d'Arcadie* four figures inspect a stone structure in a rural landscape. A finger traces an inscription, an epigram – ET IN ARCADIA EGO.

The whole scenario is a puzzle, a riddle-figure. We need to supply a verb to the epigram and suggest a subject – "Even I am/was in Arcadia"? Who is the absent "I" (EGO)? Is this a tomb? If so, where is the conventional address DIS MANIBUS – to the spirits of the dead? Is this a pedestal missing its statue? Are these the words of the interred, or of an absent statue? Is this scene even in Arcadia – the archetypal rural idyll, garden of Eden? Is this death speaking – a reminder that even in Eden life ends? Is this a celebration or a warning? Who are these figures-in-a-landscape? Are they really the shepherds of the title? – two of them wear the wreaths of victors in the games. Who is the female figure, to whom another seems to be looking for comment or insight? She is not dressed as a shepherd. Who witnessed this scene to paint it, or is it fabulation, invention, speculation, allegory? In which case whose work, and for whom? And who actually was Nicolas Poussin?

Here is what Gabriella Giannachi has to say about this riddling dynamic of presence and absence (in a draft of our forthcoming book *Archaeologies of AI: An Entanglement of Archive and Intelligence*):

Archives and archival strategies, including documentation, became the subject of artworks … One of the first paintings operating as a document as well as an artwork, more specifically, a portrait and a self-portrait, was Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage* (1434), National Gallery, London. The artwork represents the Lucchese merchant Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife Giovanna Cenami. It was the art historian Erwin Panofsky who first asserted that the work operates as a document in that it shows an inscription on the wall saying "Johannes de Eyck fuit hic" ("Jan van Eyck was here"), with the painter's image appearing in the small mirror in the back as evidence that this had happened. This work thus is, as Panofsky indicated, both a document and a work of art. Interestingly, as the art historian Linda Seidel noted, the tense of the verb is in the past, drawing attention to the fact that the artist is no longer present, "as we *see* now what he once *saw*," an indication perhaps of the artist's awareness of the complex temporality of the work – the image of the (absent) artist is reflected in the mirror in the painting. Hence, as Omar Calabrese noted, the term "hic" could refer to four different locations: "in the room," "in the scene," "here below" (ie in the mirror) and "in the painting," reflecting the multiplication of temporalities *and* spatialities implicated by the artist's absent-presence in the artwork.

Now for two images in a recent paper I wrote about Benjamin's dialectical images – Adorno's riddle-figures.

Altar dedicated to divinity Coventina in the late second or early third century CE by Vinomathus. Found in 1876 in the stone cistern of a spring maned for her at the Roman outpost variously referred to as Procolita, Brocolitia, or Brocolita, now known as Carrawburgh, part of the border monument Hadrian's Wall in northern England. There are two inscriptions in Spain and one in France that may name her, but otherwise she is known nowhere else – this is her place. Who was the Vinomathus who fulfilled a vow he made to dedicate an altar? Is the face that of Coventina – an angel divine? Called forth by the votive inscription and the altar, the artifact that establishes connection between the suppliant and divinity.

Serres, in his marvelous book *Angels*, associates communication with the divine figures of angel and Hermes, establishing connection across distance, managing presence and absence. The face on Coventina's altar brought to mind another, a few miles and several centuries distant.

Angel face? Gravestone, St Cuthbert's churchyard, Elsdon, Northumberland, England. One of more than 50 that feature winged faces, carved by only a few hands at the end of the eighteenth century. Gravestones are, of course, sites and artifacts that connect living, the dead, and worlds beyond mortality.

Here is another.

Bamburgh St Aidan’s churchyard 2005 (founded 636).

Inscription erodes with the weather, with time. This motif of inscription that loses its agency, its capacity to signify, features in Walter Scott’s novel *The Antiquary* and, notably, in his *Old Mortality* (1817). Scott opens this historical novel by recalling Robert Paterson, “Old Mortality” – an itinerant mason who toured Scotland re-engraving the tombs of 17th-century Covenanter martyrs. Paterson’s re-inscriptions match Scott’s retelling of the 17th-century religious and political disputes as a comment upon our own historical agency, our capacity to make a difference in our actions – rescuing memory, maintaining inspiring presence.

Don Lavigne

Donald E. Lavigne is Editor of Helios and Assoc. Prof. of Classics at Texas Tech, where he also serves as the Associate Director of the Humanities Center. His work largely concerns the oral/poetic landscape of Archaic Greece and its influence on the Hellenistic and (some) Roman poets. He has been focused on the seamier side of the Classical World in his research on the iambic tradition in Greece and Rome and in his exploration of epigram. He is currently at work on a book on ancient epigram, exploring the poetic strategies employed in the overtly fictional and

divisible epigrammatic poetics.

Here is how Don described his talk:

“I will explore the ways in which early Greek epigram interacts with the more developed forms of Archaic Greek poetry. Given the strong textuality of epigram, it has been assumed that the genre is quite distinct from the media of other Archaic poetry and the performance traditions intimately associated with them. While it is true that media matters in the experience of poetry, it is equally true, as McLuhan has pointed out, that new media take some time to develop their particularities of experience. In this early period, when the genre of epigram was only just emerging, it will be instructive to analyze these short poems and their accompanying monuments as *elements of and participants within the performance culture of Archaic Greece*. In so doing, I will argue that epigram has a foot in both camps, operating within a rich and developed song culture even as its materiality spawns the nascent features of the literary. A new medium is born in, through and, eventually, against the old.”

Here’s the essay about dialectical images, with discussion also of Adorno’s riddle-figures in a negative dialectics – closely related concepts in an archaeological sensibility.