Still Speaking with the Dead: The Reinvention of a Topos

Jürgen Pieters

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The dead are villains we pretend to love.

Their waxy faces a serene reproach.

We learn their secrets with distaste:

the things they did make them at least

as bad as we are – even worse because

they’re dead, and we’re alive and might improve.

The dead are villains we pretend to love.

They died deliberately to spite us,

To leech our lifeblood for their awful dryness.
We clothe their faults in all the virtues
they never had, to keep them in their place,
where they should stay, away from us.

The dead are villains we pretend to love
though every now and then we hear their voice
speaking exactly as they spoke to us,

and see their smiles again as they once smiled,
and their hair unfaded as it was in life.

Jamie McKendrick

Introduction: back in time

“These things cannot happen”, Kenneth Gross writes in his wonderful book on *The dream of the moving statue*, “a statue cannot move or speak; it cannot open its eyes, nod, or call out, cannot tell a story, dance, or do work;
it cannot turn on the viewer, or run away, banishing its solidity and repose, shedding its silence. A statue is almost by definition a thing that stands still, and what we call its movement is at best a resonant figure of speech. Yet these things happen; we imagine them happening. Our language requires that they happen. The fantasy of a statue that comes to life is as central a fable as we have. The idea of motion or speech in an inanimate stone is an inescapable possibility, a concept of a sort so basic that we can hardly call it a metaphor.”

In my 2005 book *Speaking with the dead*, I wrote on a similar fable, on a fantasy so basic that we cannot simply label it a metaphor either, or an allegory for that matter. Like statues that move, dead people who talk belong to the reign of the imagination. Yet, dead people *do* talk, to paraphrase Gross, if only because we need them to and therefore we imagine them talking. Like the topos of the moving statue, that of the conversation with the dead offers a classic fantasy of Western culture: the fantasy embodies a scenario that is basic to our conception of the real and to our conception of how we relate to that real, both as readers and as mortal beings. My book’s starting-point was quite simply that: an analysis of the fantasy and of some of the developments that it underwent, would tell us something about the way we act and command ourselves, in both these guises.

After the book was published, it didn’t take me too long to see that the subject wouldn’t let go as easily as I had hoped it would. Like the dead themselves in the stories that I had been writing about, the topic kept returning to me, no matter how hard I tried to keep it at bay. Part of the reason why it returned, I guess, is that the book that I had written didn’t manage to say the final word on this huge and still very lively tradition. As I began research for what I hoped would soon become my next book, new examples of *post-mortem* dialogues kept cropping up – so many dead still
wanting to be heard and talked to! Novels and poems, television series, movies and songs kept providing me with new materials, as did a number of interesting monographs that had come out (or that I had only learned about) while I was finishing my book. In 2002, Margaret Atwood published her *Negotiating with the Dead*, the written outcome of the Empson lectures she had delivered one year earlier. In her book, she deals with the writer’s task to remember and commemorate past generations and cultures, pointing at further examples in which the dialogue with the dead occurs and asserting, by way of a concluding hypothesis, that “perhaps all writing is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead”. Apart from Atwood’s book, two other magnificent works are worth mentioning here: Robert Pogue Harrison’s *The Dominion of the Dead*, published in 2003, and Harald Weinreich’s *Lethe. The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, first published in English translation in 2004 (the original German book came out in 2000). In 2005, finally, Jeff Belanger published his *Communicating with the Dead*, a book in which the conversation with the dead that in each of the previous books was taken as a metaphor suddenly became literalized. Belanger’s book, as it is said on the back cover, “tells the facts of how communication beyond the grave really works.”

In the two years following upon my book’s publication, I wrote a couple of companion pieces in which the topos of the dialogue with the dead again took centre-stage, dealing with authors like W.G. Sebald (*The Rings of Saturn, Campo Santo*) and John Berger (*This is where we meet*). I gradually began to see the absence of Berger and Sebald as a distinct shortcoming of my book, since their dialogues with the dead seemed to open up new and exciting avenues of exploration in the landscape of this topical tradition. Fortunately though, the effect which these and other lacunae had on some of the book’s readers that I spoke with was entirely different. For them, the absence of those writers and other examples that immediately came to their
minds (a novel by the Hungarian author György Konrád, some stories and poems by Jorge Luis Borges, …) seemed to add to their appreciation of the book rather than detract from it. I gather that this response can also be seen as the outcome of the topos’s working tradition: after all, the conversation with the dead is more often than not described as a conversation among friends. For Cicero, as Jacques Derrida reminds us in his Politics of Friendship, the epitome of friendship is to be found in the possibility (or rather the certainty, as Cicero sees it) that those who are left behind will continue their conversations, from this side of the big divide, with the one who has gone.

It is an imperative of true friendship that we especially share that which we consider to be rightfully our own. Intimi are the ones whom we are willing to give access to that which we keep away from those who are not entitled to our amicitia. It was in this spirit of true friendship that I was sent an envelope with two newspaper clippings, by yet another reader of my book, who in a brief accompanying letter explained to me why exactly he had sent me those two pieces. Having read my book, this reader felt that I had paid too little attention to what he described as the ‘rear’ side of the tradition that my book dealt with, its darker side, as he put it, in which the dialogue with the dead is not entirely conceived of in terms of universal and unproblematic friendship, but in terms of conflict and spite. The conversation with the dead wasn’t always as easy as my book seemed to suggest, my new friend the reader concluded. And he was right, of course.

The clippings in the envelope were two poems, published in the Times Literary Supplement, in two separate issues during the Winter of 2005, if I remember correctly. The opening line of the first poem, which I have quoted in its entirety as a motto above this essay, to a certain extent already makes clear my reader’s point: “The dead are villains we pretend to love.” The line keeps returning in the poem, as some sort of bitter refrain, one could say,
but it also has a touch of realism. Indeed, our friendship with the dead is not always as sincere as we generally proclaim it to be.

The poem about our villainous dead is entitled “Unfaded”, and it is written by the Liverpudlian poet Jamie McKendrick, who published several interesting and prizewinning volumes of poetry up to now and who also edited the *Faber Book of 20th-Century Italian Poems*. The second poem in the envelope that I received was entitled “A Pebble on Your Grave”. It is written by Elaine Feinstein, yet another native of Liverpool, but at least one generation older than McKendrick. Feinstein is the very prolific author of fourteen novels, several screen and radio plays and poetry collections. She also published a number of highly acclaimed biographies, of Pushkin, for instance, and of the Russians poet Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova. Feinstein is also the author of a life of Ted Hughes, who was a close friend of hers and whose *Birthday Letters* are probably one of the most heartrending contemporary contributions to the tradition of the conversation with the dead. “A Pebble on Your Grave” is now included in the poet’s latest collection, *Talking to the Dead*, a volume dedicated to the memory of Feinstein’s late husband Arnold. This is the poem as it was published in the *TLS*:

It’s easy to love the dead.

Their voices are mild. They don’t argue.

Once in the earth, they belong to us faithfully.

But do they forgive us?

Our crabby failure to understand
Their complaints, our manifest indignation

at words of blame. Once, I remember

you broke off some angry

exchange to say unhappily:

“I don’t want your silly grief

after I’m dead, it’s now

I need your pity.”

Humanists and their conversations with the dead

There is a marked distinction, the title of Feinstein’s recent collection seems to urge, between talking to the dead and conversing with them. From our perspective at least, the two prepositions harbour a world of difference. In the former case, the ones who live continue to talk to their deceased as if nothing has really happened, but the silence from the other side remains deafening. In the latter case, the conversation between the living and the dead is by no means less monological (here too, the living do all the talking, as Stephen Greenblatt puts it in his famous analysis of the topos) but to describe this mechanism as a conversation or a dialogue is to set it apart from and above those instances where we instinctively continue to address the dead without really expecting a response from them. When we talk to the dead, one could even suggest, we dearly want them not to respond, since
our talking to them is generally but a first step in the process of our getting used to their silence. When we talk to the dead, we begin to address the void they have left behind. When we converse with the dead, on the other hand, we urge them (equally dearly) to talk back to us, if only because we the queries that we have deserve a response.

One of the more telling examples of the traditional conversation with the dead that I have dealt with in my book can be found in the famous letter-poem that Petrarch wrote for his friend and patron Giacomo Colonna, in reply to the latter’s demand that Petrarch write something about his personal history. The letter was written somewhere in 1338, during a period in his life when Petrarch spent much of his time in the Vaucluse. There, he wrote many of his important works, in the sort of seclusion that writers often dream of. As he puts it, the only living company that he has to bear is that of his dog and a servant. Apart from them, he is surrounded by the Muses and by a modest library of books and manuscripts. With the writers of these texts, and with the authors of an occasional letter that he receives, he carries on a continued conversation that brings him, however, not only joy and happiness. His living correspondents take up more of his time than he is willing to allow, and they complain over and over that their friend locks himself up and avoids their company. The conversations that he has with the dead, Petrarch claims, are completely different: they don’t mind at all that he is thrifty with both his time and his attention. They are patient, always willing to lend him an ear at the time that suits him best.

Colonna was familiar enough with the classics not to take too much offence at Petrarch’s suggestion that only a dead friend can be a true friend. As a true humanist himself, he knew full well that Petrarch was merely elaborating upon an idea that he could have borrowed from one of many possible authorities – Cicero being the most likely one. While it is hard to say exactly when a metaphor gains the status of a topos, it can be argued
that Petrarch had a decisive impact on the development of this specific case. In his work the conversation with the dead acquires a fixed *locus* (literally a *topos*), that of the library in which the humanist scholar embarks upon a dialogue with the books and the authors that he reads. Before Petrarch, the conversation with the dead was located elsewhere: with Homer and Virgil, and even with Petrarch’s contemporary Dante, the dialogue took place in the underworld. Announcing the early-modern age in more than one respect, in Petrarch’s writing the conversation with the dead surfaces. The new location, however, does not involve a decisive change in function. Like his predecessors and most of his followers, Petrarch makes use of the metaphor of the conversation with the dead to refer to a special insight into the course of things and to the transfer of a special form of knowledge that cannot be gained from either everyday conversations or from the reading of ‘ordinary’ texts.

The scene of the traditional conversation with the dead (in writings by other humanist scholars like Machiavelli, Sir Philip Sidney and the Dutch seventeenth century poet and *savant* Constantijn Huygens) lays out and organizes the practice of the historian: it provides his interest with a scenario which is that of a paradoxical question-and-answer-session in which one party is present and another is not, but which does nevertheless result in the unproblematic performance of a narrative of insight and understanding. Through this conversation, the humanist scholar attains knowledge, not so much of the past but of his own time – or better still, he gains insight in his own time through the detour of the past. (Note the immediate difference with our traditional idea of 19th century historicism in which the knowledge we derive is definitely *of* the past.)

The scene is governed, moreover, by a distinct rhetorical framework, which is to say that the key to the success of this paradoxical if not impossible conversation lies in the power of language to materialize the immaterial –
both the language of the historian and that of the absent interlocutor who
needs to become or be made present. As François Hartog has recently
suggested, in the introduction to his book Evidence de l’histoire, the
rhetorical figure of enargeia, or evidentia as Cicero called it – the specific
use of language which allows the speaker to literally visualize the object of
his attention before his audience and to turn the audience from auditors into
spectators – may well be what lies behind the Western conception of history
as a form of discourse that is aimed at what Hartog calls “une visibilité de
l’invisible, une épiphanie, le surgissement de l’invisible dans le visible”.
Hartog’s description and indeed the rhetorical instrument of enargetic
language also run as a fil rouge through the history of poetics, which is of
course not so coincidental: Greek historiography in the tradition of
Herodotus originates from the Homeric tradition of the epos and even
though after the fifth century BC the two traditions separated to some
degree (leading up to the trail of exercises began by Aristotle to distinguish
historical texts from poetical ones) history and poetry have to a large extent
remained one another’s double – in the sense that, on the one hand, an ideal
form of historical discourse has traditionally been described by means of
qualifications that also apply to ideal forms of poetry, whereas on the other
hand poetry has at more than one stage of its development been specifically
praised for its ‘historical’ value, for the way it allows its readers to arrive at
some form of historical understanding. Good poetry is poetry that enables us
to remember what is worth remembering, or to come to terms with the past
in other significant ways, whereas, inversely, good history is a form of
history that has distinct poetic qualities, both in terms of the language that is
used (energetic and affective) and in terms of the impact that its has on its
audience (epiphanic).

The conversational scene implied in the writings of early and late humanists
like Petrarch, Machiavelli, Sidney and Huygens betrays a conception of
history and the presence of the past that is largely alien to us but that fits
perfectly in what Hartog in one of his major book-publications has
described as ‘the ancient regime of historicity’ that ran from the Greek period up to and including the seventeenth century – from Herodotus to the humanists, so to speak. “The old regime of historicity”, Hartog writes, “corresponds to the great *historia magistra vitae* model: it is founded on the parallel, calls upon the lessons of history and valorizes imitation. Bearer of examples, the past is not (truly) of the past, for it is not outdated. If a Golden Age exists, it is behind us. Time does not march on.” The tradition is not as homogeneous, of course, as one might conclude on the basis of these few sentences, but Hartog’s careful analysis of it gives an apt idea of the specific nature of the early-modern outlook on history. On average, fifteenth and sixteenth century ‘humanist’ historians begin to gain a distinct awareness of the specificity of the past and of the difference between their own times and those of their famous dead interlocutors. Antique and medieval histories tend to be framed in universalist rather than historicist terms. “*Autres temps, autres moeurs*”, Denys Hay writes, “was a concept which had little real meaning in antiquity and none in the Middle Ages.” The historical investigations of the earliest generations of humanists, on the other hand, are very clearly premised upon the historicist principle that there is a distinct difference between the past and the present. Early-modern historical practice is directed, not so much towards the annulment of those differences in the future, but towards the hope of a better and more productive usage of them. As the work of Petrarch, Bruni, Machiavelli and Guicciardini aimed to show, the past was there to teach us lessons and to improve ourselves on the basis of the examples it provides. For these early-modern historians, then, the conversation with the dead served the purpose of revelation, as the title of one of Anthony Grafton’s many erudite books on the period has it: it provided the living interlocutors with a means to exchange their present for a better and hopefully not too distant future and, if that wouldn’t work, with the possibility of a brief escape from their present into an imagined past.

With the arrival of the Enlightenment and the concomitant victory of the “modernes” over the “anciens”, a new regime of historicity sets in,
according to Hartog, in which the articulation between past, present and future is organized differently. While the goal of historiography is still a didactic one, the interrelationships between past, present and future gradually begin to shift. “[F]rom the end of the 18th century,” Hartog writes, “Europe experienced a temporalization of history: to the idea of progress was added that of a History – history with a capital 'h' – conceived as a process, and even more as a self-understanding situated in time. From then on, time was no longer just the framework of what happens, things no longer happen in time but through time: time transforms itself as an actor. So much so that 1789 can mark (symbolically at least) the passage from the old to the new regime of historicity. In the old regime, one turned towards the past to understand what was happening, given that intelligibility came from the past, moved to the present and on to the future. In the new regime, it is, on the contrary, the future which becomes preponderant: it is the future which casts light on the present, making it understandable, and with it the past. It is thus towards the future that one should march. Time is perceived (often painfully) as acceleration; the 'exemplary' of olden times cedes its place to the unique. The event becomes something which is not repeated. We have then entered into a Futurist regime.” This futurist regime is the regime of historicity that underlies the historicism of the 19th century in which, as Ranke put it, every historical moment should be understood in its own terms, wie es gewesen. Interestingly and ironically, the idiosyncracy of every historical moment is framed in this new regime in terms of the teleological development that turned this moment into what it was. ‘What it was’ is quite simply ‘how it came to be’: past, present and future are implicated, in this regime, in a mechanism of inevitable finality and progress. The past develops into the future by way of the present, only to result in an outcome that was, seen in hindsight, always already there. Since it is the future, as Hartog asserts, that in this new regime becomes preponderant – here, one could say, it is the future that reveals the past rather than the other way round – may well explain why the tradition of the conversation with the dead is not very prominent in this period. Given the fact that our topos is clearly related to the broader thematic field of the tradition of the “historia magistra vitae”, this is indeed quite logical. As
Reinhart Koselleck has shown, the gradual disappearance of the Ciceronian locus with the rise of the Enlightenment goes hand in hand with a redefinition of the experience of time and of the relationship between the present and the future. The chronological experience that underlies the topos of the “historia magistra vitae” – a moment of anachronism in which the divide between past and present is temporarily lifted so that the living may be graced with an audition at the palaces of their long gone ‘contemporaries’ – is indeed that of the conversation with the dead.

**Toward a new regime of historicity**

In *Régimes d'historicité*, Hartog not only deals with past regimes of historicity. The book also inquires into the specific nature of our contemporary experiences of the past. Hartog’s suggestion seems to be that the twentieth century saw the gradual rise of a new regime of historicity which in his book he labels “presentist”. The watershed moment for him is that of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, but in the introduction to his book Hartog looks back upon the 20th century, in the history of which he discerns a number of phenomena that in hindsight can be seen to prefigure the “mise en doute du temps lui-même comme progrès” that defines the presentist regime. As we just saw, the very idea of progress was the defining instance of the temporal experience underlying the futurist regime of historicity that reigned over the long nineteenth century. What sets off our times from the optimism of that era are of course the First and Second World Wars, both fought over the iconic ideal of the historiography of the 19th century: the European nation state and its dynamic potential to shape and change the course of history. With the downfall of that ideal and the growing awareness of the dangers inherent in nationalist obsessions, 20th century historians from several post-1950 generations began to look differently at the past, especially at the recent past which had become such a marked location of suffering, pain, loss and guilt.
The critique of progress that underlies the presentist regime of historicity, Hartog goes on to write, often goes together with a feeling of in-between-ness, of being caught up between a past that is somehow lost forever and a future that one desperately wants to ward off. The symbolic moment of 1989 is also that of the debates on ‘the end of history’, inspired by Francis Fukuyama’s book of that title. Though its meaning in Fukuyama’s book is somewhat different, the phrase could indeed be taken as a shorthand for the presentist feeling that the future no longer bears a direct relationship to the past, unpredictable as it has become. Similarly, Hartog points out, the past also begins to be scrutinized for its less predictable aspects. The past becomes opaque, much more opaque than it was taken to be in the ancient and futurist regimes of historicity, where the past’s exemplary nature urged historians to select their materials in terms of their significance in light of the present.

Hartog points to Valéry, Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Proust and Péguy, among others, as forerunners in a sense of the presentist regime that gained dominance around 1989. Each of these authors in their own way, was a prime witness to the experience of a culture that finds itself in a gap ‘between past and future’, to borrow the title of Hannah Arendt’s book from which Hartog seems to have derived much of his analysis. One particularly significant passage in Arendt’s text is that in which she analyses the famous scene from book 8 of the *Odyssee* where Ulysses sheds ‘tears of remembrance’ over the historical account of his own deeds chanted by the blind poet Demodocus. For Arendt, the scene marks the beginning of historiography in the sense as she wants to understand it, Hartog suggests, not as a form of poetical discourse meant to provide us with pleasure and instruction, but as one which provokes us to tears and causes us to regret the passing of time. As such, these historical texts make us (more) aware of our own mortality, Hartog asserts, but also of what he calls ‘l’expérience d’une
distance de soi avec soi”. For him, this seems to be the very kernel of the presentist encounter with the past.

It is important to stress in this respect that the historical account that Ulysses is crying over is an account of his own deeds. The historical experience, here, is not a collective one, as it was in the nineteenth-century regime of historicity, but a private one. At the same time it is an experience of privation, marked by the feeling that something is lost forever and that this loss is supposed to remain with us. It is the loss that marks us as historical beings in the present, one could say.

The same feeling underlies most 20th-century examples of the conversation with the dead that I came across in my research. What is foregrounded in the topical scenario nowadays is not so much the possibility of instruction and the exemplary potential of the wisdom of the dead, but the distance that separates the living from them and, connected to that, the obligation of the living to do their utmost best to remember the dead and to give them a place in our culture. ‘Max’ Sebald’s numerous fictional dialogues with the dead are very instructive in this respect – “A quoi bon la littérature”, he wonders: “Perhaps only to help us remember” – as is the opening chapter of György Konrád’s 1987 novel A Feast in the Garden, in which the narrator, who narrowly escaped the camps, invites dead friends and relatives whose fate was less fortunate into the lonely surroundings of his garden. The work of Sebald and Konrád reveals a decisive paradox that inheres in presentist conversations with the dead: the dialogues in question are not so much directed towards a ‘reawakening’ or retrieval of the dead which could establish their presence as a ‘living’ one, as was the case in the early-modern, humanist instances of the topos, and even more clearly in Michelet’s appropriation of it. Rather, with Sebald, Konrád and other twentieth-century authors who make use of it, the conversation with the dead involves an attempt (more often than not a failed one at that) to remedy
a certain loss that is felt by the living, some or other void within their existence which they hope a retrieval of the past ("le temps perdu") will enable them to fill. The presentist conversation with the dead is more often than not an occasion of mourning.

From translation to transference: let the dead speak now, or forever hold their breath

The most telling characteristic of the presentist regime of historicity, in Hartog’s analysis, is its introduction of a new historical paradigm, governed by the principles of memory and heritage rather than that of objective reconstruction. To a certain extent, this new historiographic model seems to entail the possibility of a return to the ancient regime of the early-modern humanists, whose preoccupations with the writings of history were equally memorial and centred, as we know, on the revival of a classical culture to which they considered themselves the rightful heirs. However, a straightforward return to the ideals of this regime – insofar as such a return would indeed be desirable – is clearly impossible. There is, simply, no way in which we turn back the clock, especially not in matters like these: as Reinhart Koselleck has made clear, the experience of time in modernity differs immensely from that in the early-modern period.

The presentist nature of contemporary historiography will be self-evident: in the logic of memory, as Andreas Huyssen and Paul Ricoeur among others have stressed, the past is only interesting inasmuch as it continues to live on in the present. To borrow the title of Huyssen’s recent book, the past is studied as a ‘present past’. Numerous are the manifestations of this presentist dogma within the realm of contemporary critical theory, whether
it be in the works of New Historicist and Cultural Materialist critics who continue to stress that any historical inquiry is always made from and directed toward the present, or in the writings of representatives of the so-called postmodern historicism like Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra or Frank Ankersmit, all of whom have concurred with Michel de Certeau’s dictum that to do history is to make and fabricate history, where the materials may come from the past but the factory and the product are decidedly present. The stress, here, is not only on the unmitigated presence of the historian (which, after all, is an idea that is shared by Ranke and other 19th century historicists), but more so on the fundamental absence of the historical object or subject under scrutiny. This is a principle that New Historicism and Cultural Materialism as historical praxes share with trauma theory, Holocaust studies and other forms of postmodern ‘memorial presentism’. In several of these, the motif of the conversation with the dead returns, as I have just pointed out, guided by a different imperative from the one it has in the early-modern period, an imperative of the sort that can already be heard in the work of Michelet, where the urge always to remember turns the historian into a ventriloquist who represents the past as a porte-parole of the dead. With Michelet, the historian is no longer a seer who has been inspired by the Muses and who on the basis of this inspiration can predict the future, as in Greek times, nor as in the humanist period a careful reader of the past, always on the outlook for a means to derive from past events the solution to present problems, but one who can try to resolve the past, restore its injustice, and mourn the passing of so many forgotten lives. In the presentist paradigm the emphasis seems to have shifted predominantly to the latter of those three activities.

In one of her fundamental contributions to the study of early modern humanism, Carol Quillen defines the period’s notion of historicity in terms that resume the metaphor that is central to my enquiry: “Early Renaissance humanism”, Quillen writes, “can be identified most broadly as a set of textual practices that define a relationship between the present and the
classical and early Christian past. Petrarch and his successors accepted as ideals for their own time cultural (literary and moral) standards that they found expressed in the works of ancient and Greek and Roman authors. They assumed that these authors, despite their acknowledged otherness, speak powerfully to modern concerns. The writings of early Renaissance humanists thus imagine a context in which authors ancient and modern, Christian and pagan, can converse in a common language about abiding questions fundamental to the human condition.”

In our own ‘post-modern’ time, the belief in the existence of one single ‘human condition’ and of a concomitant common language in which that condition can be communicated and translated without any serious difficulty has come under an immense strain (one of the most telling manifestations of which being the suspicion that the notion of ‘humanism’ still generates). Here lies the fundamental difference between the ‘humanist’ regime of historicity and the ‘presentist’ one that Hartog considers typical of our own times. While the humanist praxis of the conversation with the dead seems to be governed by the principle of translation, that of the presentist praxis is governed by the principle of transference, a concept which is etymologically close to it (transferre, trans-latus) but which nevertheless presupposes a different articulation of the relationship between past, present and future.

The former model follows the guidelines of the first regime of historicity that Hartog singled out: the translation of past into present cannot fail to be productive, given their unproblematic continuity and the scholar’s belief in a common language and a common heritage founded upon that language. Even though the early-modern period marks the beginning of our awareness of the principle of historical difference, the axiom of translatability simply demands that one moment can be seen, unproblematically, in terms of the other. In the ‘presentist’ regime, where transference, not translation rules,
things seem to have changed rather drastically. Here, the historical sense, as T.S. Eliot famously put it at the beginning of the twentieth century, can only be obtained “by great labour”, by the labour of *Durcharbeitung*, where the distinction between past and present is premised upon the awareness that time has elapsed and run its irreparable and irreversible course, leading to a difference that can in no way simply be annulled. Here, difference rules and the essence of what is historically unique can never be recovered for what it is. The dictum that the past is a foreign country where they do things differently, offers an apt illustration of the presentist regime of historicity, its point being not that we can ever become natives to the strange country we call the past; all we can hope to become is foreigners to ourselves, estranged from the self-evidence of our own times.

As Hartog has pointed out, a large-scale concern with memory and commemoration clearly marks our idea of what it is to do history and to experience the past. From memory to *memoria*, the rhetorical concept that is so central to early-modern culture, we are taking once more a small etymological step, but as with ‘translation’ and ‘transference’ the difference is again overwhelming. In a recent publication (in Dutch) I have tried to mark out some of that difference by comparing Walter Benjamin’s image of the angel of history – the angel from the *Thesen über den Begriff der Geschichte*, who is blown forward, out of paradise, by the wind of progress but who finds it impossible not to look backwards – with the two-faced allegorical figures of “prudentia” that we know from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These allegories are part and parcel of the conceptual framework of *memoria*: their Janus-like face allows them to keep a steady eye on both the past and the future, thus enabling them to arrive at a true memorial performance, one that is premised on memory (past), intelligence (present) and foresight (future). Benjamin’s angel only seems able to perform part of the memorial mechanism – or better still: while he tries to fulfil the memorial task, he is prevented from doing so to the full on account of the circumstances that surround him.
If we want to fully understand the nature and impact of our present regime of historicity, I take Hartog to be saying, we will need to gain more awareness of such differences, in the hope that these will allow us to understand that there are other ways of articulating time-relationships than the presentist one we have come to see as self-evident. In this respect, Hartog’s plea to me seems concomitant with that of David Simpson, who in an important new contribution to the analysis of our contemporary “culture of commemoration” has argued that what we need to do nowadays, both as historians and as critical subjects, is “to take time”, that is, to reclaim time for what it is and not to let ourselves be hurried on by all sorts of historical events or circumstances that seem to isolate our present from a past that is gone forever and a future that we don’t really want to come. The reduction of time to an eternal or momentaneous now is indeed a threat that inheres in the very principle of presentism, no matter how memorial it proclaims itself to be. The occasion of Simpson’s book is the cataclysmic moment of 9/11, which has generally been taken and portrayed as a moment of true dislocation, a moment, as Simpson puts it, “simply erasing what was there rather than evolving from anything already in place, and threatening a yet more monstrous future.” The moment has also been read in terms of an attack on the very culture of the West, in which the ideas of tradition and continuity used to reign supreme. It was an attack on everything ‘we’ stood for, of the very values that turned our culture into ‘the’ culture. Simpson’s book offers not so much an analysis of the moment itself, but of the numerous acts of commemoration that immediately followed upon the moment, “correspondingly urgent and perhaps untimely, hurried along”, Simpson writes, as if they were provoked by the feeling that there was no time left, literally even.

I’m sure there will be other and possibly more appropriate examples that I’m not familiar with, but there is one significant instance of a 9/11 commemoration that I know of in which the topos of the conversation with
the dead resonates very forcefully – making clear, indeed, that the topos can still work for us. Even though Simpson doesn’t mention it in his book, I’m confident that he would consider it a perfect example of his urge that our culture take its time. The work that I’m thinking of is John Adams’s ”On the Transmigration of Souls”, a wonderful, haunting piece of music that was performed by the New York Philharmonic (conducted by Lorin Maazel) at the Lincoln Center in the week of September 19-24, 2002, to commemorate the first anniversary of 9/11. While the piece only lasts for about 25 minutes, it gives the impression that it could go on forever. The composition opens with street sounds (the noise of traffic and sirens) gradually infused with voices reciting a list of names in the form of a litany, the names of victims of the attacks, culled randomly from newspaper memorials and read aloud by friends and relatives of the composer. The list is cut through by the voice of a young boy, saying “missing” over and over again. The single word echoes throughout, and even as the voice stops saying it we do continue to hear it. As the list continues to grow, the orchestra takes over, accompanied by groups of choirs, singing words and phrases taken mainly from interviews appearing in the “Portraits of Grief” series in The New York Times that Simpson also writes about in his book on 9/11 and from missing person posters that were spread over the city in the weeks and months following upon the event.

Adams’s composition is an instance of the culture of commemoration that resulted from the events of 9/11 in more than one respect. The period following that fated day – the outcome of the war on Terror in Europe and elsewhere, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq – entailed a new way of what Simpson describes as our habit of “framing the dead”. The word’s ambiguity is deliberate, referring both to a positive mechanism of memorialisation in which the dreadful event is incorporated “into a more lasting narrative than the mere moment itself affords”, but also to a less humane and more exploitative mechanism in which, as Simpson puts it “[these] dead have been framed to the purpose of justifying more deaths”,
and the suffering of other people – in Iraq most notably – for whom probably no memorials will be erected and no pieces of music composed. “On the Transmigration of Souls” can very easily be framed itself within the ambivalence of the specific memorial process that was spawned in September 2001.

The title of Adams’s composition refers to the Pythagorean principle that in more ways than one, as I have shown in my book, is at the heart of the tradition of the conversation with the dead. The principle refers to the idea that after death the soul escapes from the body of a dead person and sets up house elsewhere. One typical occurrence of the idea is in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, book 15, where it is argued that “Our bodies, whether destroyed by the flames of the funeral pyre, or by slow decay, do not fell any suffering – you must not think so. Our souls are immortal, and are ever recievied into new homes, where they live and dwell, when they have left their previous abode.” The transmigration of the souls then (their metempsychosis to use a synonymous term) is that which guarantees the possibility of a continued conversation between different generations, both present and ‘absent’. For Adams, as he put in an interview, the piece’s title not only evokes “the transition from living to dead, but also the change that takes place within the souls of those that stay behind, of those who suffer pain and loss and then themselves come away from that experience transformed”. Describing his composition as a “memory space” to which every listener can turn for a personal response to the commemorated event, Adams characterises his work as a true *locus communis*, a common place around which we can assemble and pay our dues. The piece is structurally layered, as I already suggested (the recorded voices, the music from the orchestra, the singing of the choirs), but it is also marked by a distinct historical awareness that can also be considered layered. Making use, as David Schiff’s liner notes for the CD-recording have it, of the nineteenth-century format of the symphonic orchestra that is provoked by Adams into a distinct twenty-first century sound (“post-industrial” Schiff calls it), the
composition performs an ancient theme – that of metempsychosis – and brings it to life, thereby revitalizing the topic of the conversation with the dead that many early-modern humanists held so dear. “My desire in writing this piece”, Adams explains, again with reference to the topos that has been central to my story all along, “[was] to achieve in musical terms the same sort of feeling one gets upon entering one of those old, majestic cathedrals in France or Italy. When you walk into the Chartres Cathedral, for example, you experience an immediate sense of something otherworldly. You feel you are in the presence of many souls, generations upon generations of them, and you sense their collected energy as if they were congregated or clustered in that one spot.”

Coda

As the orchestra works its way toward the climax of “On the Transmigration of Souls”, the interspersed phrases, sung over and over again, become ever more poignant – “She looks so full of life in that picture”, “He was the apple of my father’s eye”, “It was a beautiful day”, “I see water and buildings”. The latter phrase was uttered by Madeline Amy Sweeney, a flight attendant at one of the two fated planes that crashed into the Twin Towers, as the plane neared its destination.

After the orchestral climax, the music gradually subsides and again a list of names is chanted, solemnly, by female voices this time. In the composition’s final section, the litany is not shot through with the young boy’s voice, saying “missing”, “missing”, “missing”, … There will probably be few auditors of Adams’s work who do not spontaneously murmur the silent echo of what can only be taken as the piece’s central word.
While the conversation with the dead used to be about not having to miss out on the timeless wisdom of previous generations, it is now most definitely about bereavement and missing, whether the dead in case are truly “villains we pretend to love” or close relatives, lovers or a friends whose absence we simply cannot bear. “If I believed in an old fashioned Paradise”, Elaine Feinstein writes in one of the poems of *Talking to the Dead*, “then you, my love, would still be talking in it.” Apart from being gone, the dead have also turned silent.

The most recent instance of the topic that I came across was in this morning’s newspaper. A half-page article announces a new version of the website Respectance.com, on which next of kin can post memories of their deceased and, more importantly, share those memories with visitors on the internet. “Our website is not so much about the dead”, one of the founders is quoted in my newspaper, “but about those who remain bereaved.” Here, the conversation with the dead has become a conversation about the dead, not so much because the dead won’t talk any more, but because the living are in need of a different sort of response altogether. The new website is the result of a serious investment by a Dutch and a Belgian capital group, appropriately named Solid Ventures and Big Bang Ventures respectively. For 29 euros a year, it is said in the article, subscribers to the website who own an electronic shrine on it can keep the memorial space of their beloved one ad-free. One of the readers of my book – a close friend who has more right to be frank than anybody else I can think of – once suggested to me that it was about time that I stopped talking with the dead and began to think about the living for a change. They deserve to be talked to as well, he pointed out. Well, what can I say?


Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the dead. A Writer on Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 140. The ground of the hypothesis seems to be that the medium of literature is determined by “the fact that it survives its own performance” and that it does so as an instance of *voice*. (141-142)


Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations. TheCirculation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, 1: “If I never believed that the dead could hear me, and if I knew that the dead could not speak, I was nonetheless certain that I could re-create a conversation with them. Even when I came to understand that in my most intense moments of straining to listen all I could hear was my own voice, even then I did not abandon my desire.”


The quotation is from François Hartog, “Times and Civilizations”, an unpublished English paper that was given at the Conference ‘Literary into Cultural History’, where Hartog was one of the key-note speakers. The conference was convened by Mihaela Irimia and held at the
New Europe College, University of Bucharest, 24-26 May 2007. Parts of my text were originally given as a response to Hartog’s paper at this conference.


Hartog, “Times and Civilizations”

The work of the nineteenth-century historian who makes use of it most extensively, Jules Michelet, does not really seem to fit the outlines of the regime as Hartog describes it. It is probably safer to say that he anticipates in some ways the historical regime that follows it.


See, for instance, Machiavelli’s use of the topos in his famous letter to Francesco Vettori of December 1513: Pieters, Speaking with the dead, 19-20.

Régimes d’historicité, 15.

Régimes d’historicité, 160.

Régimes d’historicité, 15.

Régimes d’historicité, 59-65.


I discuss Michelet’s contribution to the tradition of the conversation with the dead in *Speaking with the dead*, 91-97.


*Régimes d’historicité*, 16-17.


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Simpson, 9/11, 87.

Simpson, 9/11, 88.

Pieters, *Speaking with the dead*, 92.


Quoted from [www.earbox.com/W-transmigration.html](http://www.earbox.com/W-transmigration.html) (accessed on July 31, 2007)

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