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Dr Michael Miller

The Dominion of the Dead

Robert Pogue Harrison (2003). Chicago: University of Chicago Press

The dead are all around us. This is the main thought I take from Robert Harrison's book, *The Dominion of the Dead*. There seem to be few limits to that dominion, in Harrison's accounting – our homes, our language, our literature, our rituals and memorials are all occupied by the 'remains' of the 'departed'. '*The contract between the living and the dead has traditionally been one of mutual indebtedness,*' he concludes. '*The dead depend on the living to preserve their authority, heed their concerns, and keep them going in their afterlives. In return, they help us to know ourselves, give form to our lives, organize our social relations, and restrain our destructive impulses... They are our guardians. We give them a future so that they may give us a past.*'

Harrison, a professor of Italian literature, takes us on a wandering, meditative journey through an idiosyncratic selection of his preferred cultural habitats – Thoreau's cabin at Walden, Vico's philology, Aeschylus' Xerxes in *The Persians*, the Italian poets Leopardi and Magrelli, the Vietnam memorial in Washington, lesser known works by Rilke and Conrad – along with some of the usual suspects: Homer, Joyce, Dante, Virgil and Shakespeare. Included too is Heidegger, whom he clearly admires, but with whom he picks a few small bones.

Harrison's scope encompasses the nature of place, earth, home and grave, and their relation to burial; mourning and grieving and how these are vocalized; philology as an excavation of the authority of the dead; Heideggerean existential guilt as a form of debt to the dead; Christian theology and attitudes toward grief; the way in which our species is an object of thought and how cultural representations of this incorporate or express our mortality;

and the role of the corpse and its relation to the afterlife.

The aim of all this wandering – if there is one – appears to be to trace all the ways in which the living and dead depend upon one another. Harrison says his thesis is ‘*that humans bury not simply to achieve closure and effect a separation from the dead but also and above all to humanize the ground on which they build their worlds and found their histories.*’ Indeed, he adds, humanity is all about the dead: ‘*To be human means above all to bury.*’

Harrison is extremely well read, and he drops in for brief visits with a very wide range of literary, historic, anthropological and philosophical sources and ideas. This scholarship is impressive. His writing tends to the ‘poetic’ and aphoristic – which seems equally impressive to start with, but gradually loses its impact, despite the flair for the elegant well-turned phrase. If almost every page contains a ‘To be human is to come after those who came before’, or a ‘death claims our awareness before it claims our lives’, or ‘language begins where it has already begun’, or ‘Just as burial lays the dead to rest in the earth, mourning lays them to rest in us’, then after awhile (I’m tempted to write in poor imitation) the poetry of death becomes the death of poetry.

Some of my discomfort with this ruminative rhetoric may not be simply the relentlessly clever and elegant language, but the assertiveness or conclusiveness of his statements. I suppose we can read these as provocation for our own thought, and helpfully so at times. Harrison says of his book that it is a net with ‘*empty spaces for the reader to enter and wander about in.*’

However, I think this also excuses some rather loose weaving that allows thought to wander into thoughtlessness. For example, relying on his much-favoured Vico and ‘several other theorists’ he suggests ‘*we may safely assume . . . that the human voice sang before it spoke.*’ Given ongoing debates on the origins of human speech and language, this seems unwise. As Harrison says elsewhere, though not intending it of his own writing: ‘*Even if this were true, it is far from certain.*’

While Harrison is not particularly concerned with existentialist philosophy, he does tackle Heidegger in a couple of ways. The first is a complaint that Heidegger wasn’t thorough in his philology: ‘*he rarely really probed the history of words he famously etymologized.*’ Here he relies heavily on an essay by Glenn Most to conclude that Heidegger’s understanding of Greek was confined to the language of a few philosophers, not the wider ancient Greek populous.

The second area where Harrison takes on Heidegger, is to extend the latter’s writing on guilt in *Being and Time*. He says Heidegger ‘*fails to show or even suspect that Dasein’s relation to its death passes by way of its relation to the dead.*’ In elaborating on this, he suggests that ‘*the call of conscience . . . in fact comes from – or comes in the guise of – the dead.*’ He expands on Heidegger’s notion of ‘reciprocative rejoinder’ with the past as a form of