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ROBERT POGUE HARRISON

chapter 1: The Earth and its Dead
chapter 3: What Is a House?



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T H E D O M I N I O N

O F T H E D E A D

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“Those who have had the good luck to discover Robert Pogue Harrison’s brilliant, revelatory earlier work, *Forests*, will not be surprised by the daring of conception, the range of erudition, and the acuity of perception and expression that mark *The Dominion of the Dead*. His subject is vast: the whole of human culture, of the self-image of humanity as it is perpetuated in human action and imagination, all of which is inseparable from—indeed, it arises from—our awareness that we are not self-authored, that we follow in the footsteps of the dead. This is a profoundly suggestive and illuminating work, and with its predecessor it represents a contemporary mind with a vision that seems to me indispensable.”

W. S. MERWIN

“Robert Pogue Harrison’s *Forests* introduced me to the inspired work of this meditative man—who, in *The Dominion of the Dead*, once more brings his vast, exciting erudition and spirit, and his powers of expression, to the most profound and ineluctable of human mysteries: our relation to the dead. This wonderful book is history and myth; story and philosophy. Above all, it is a poem on our essence and existence.”

SHIRLEY HAZZARD, author of *The Great Fire*

“*The Dominion of the Dead*, beautifully and eloquently written, is an extraordinary gift from a reader to a reader. Harrison excavates the material acts of bodies and words to draw the humic foundations of a present made possible only as it inhabits and dwells within the dead’s trace. Uncovering the phenomenal surface of this indwelling, Harrison wrests history from its own race toward oblivion in the dissolution of meaning into matter.”

ANN HAMILTON

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PREFACE

Whatever the rift that separates their regimes, nature and culture have at least this much in common: both compel the living to serve the interests of the unborn. Yet they differ in their strategies in one decisive respect: culture perpetuates itself through the power of the dead, while nature, as far as we know, makes no use of this resource except in a strictly organic sense. In the human realm the dead and the unborn are native allies, so much so that from their posthumous abode—wherever it be—the former hound the living with guilt, dread, and a sense of responsibility, obliging us, by whatever means necessary, to take the unborn into our care and to keep the story going, even if we never quite figure out what the story is about, what our part in it is, the end toward which it's progressing, or the moral it contains. One day the science of genetics may decode the secrets of this custodianship, but meanwhile we may rest assured that there exists an allegiance between the dead and the unborn of which we the living are merely the ligature.

Our basic human institutions—religion, matrimony, and burial, if one goes along with Giambattista Vico, but also law, language, literature, and whatever else relies on the transmission of legacy—are authored, always and from the very start, by those who came before. The awareness of death that defines human nature is inseparable from—indeed, it arises from—our awareness that we are not self-authored, that we follow in the footsteps of the dead. Everywhere one looks across the spectrum of human cultures one finds the foundational authority of the predecessor. Nonhuman species obey only the law of vitality, but humanity in its distinctive features is through and through necrocratic. Whether we are conscious of it or not we do the will of the ancestors: our commandments come to us from their realm; their precedents are our law; we submit to their dictates, even when we rebel against them. Our diligence, hardihood, rectitude, and heroism, but also our folly,

spite, rancor, and pathologies, are so many signatures of the dead on the contracts that seal our identities. We inherit their obsessions; assume their burdens; carry on their causes; promote their mentalities, ideologies, and very often their superstitions; and often we die trying to vindicate their humiliations. Why this servitude? We have no choice. Only the dead can grant us legitimacy. Left to ourselves we are all bastards. In exchange for legitimacy, which humans need and crave more than anything else, we surrender ourselves to their dominion. We may, in our modern modes, ignore or reject their ancient authority; yet if we are to gain a margin of real freedom—if we are to become “absolutely modern,” as Rimbaud put it—we must begin by first acknowledging the traditional claims that such authority has on us.

This book offers some broad perspectives on only *some* of the manifold relations the living maintain with the giant family of the dead in Western culture, both in past and present times. In themselves these relations are so vast, profound, and numerous that no book could hope to deal with their topics except fractionally and selectively. I use the word *topics* advisedly here, for in the following pages I seek out places or topoi in our midst where the dead exert their power, press their demands, grant or deny their blessing, become loquacious, and in general cohabit our worlds. Such places where the dead carry on a secular afterlife (I have little to say about any other, nonsecular afterlife they may or may not enjoy) include graves, homes, laws, words, images, dreams, rituals, monuments, and the archives of literature, whose voices always have a posthumous character of sorts. Like human dwelling, the afterlife needs places to take place *in*. If humans dwell, the dead, as it were, indwell—and very often in the same space. I am interested here above all in the nature and modes of this indwelling of the dead in the worlds of the living.

My main objective in investigating these places is not to pursue an anthropology, even less a psychology, but to uncover what I call the humic foundations of our life worlds. A humic foundation is one whose contents have been buried so that they may be reclaimed by the future. The humic holds in its conserving element the unfinished story of what has come to pass. If it is true that we move forward into the future only by retrieving the past, it is because, through burial, we consign the future of our legacies to this humic element, with its vast, diversely popu-

lated underworlds. Thus burial does not mean only the laying of bodies to rest in the ground (although religion and matrimony are more likely to disappear among humans than burial customs are). In a broader sense it means to store, preserve, and put the past on hold. Dead etymons, latent meanings, and lateral connotations lie buried in the roots and phonemes of our living words, where they carry on an active afterlife. Our psyches are the graveyards of impressions, traumas, desires, and archetypes that confound the law of obsolescence. Vico, who devoted his career to “unearthing” it, believed that all the poetic wisdom of the ancients lies buried in the Homeric epics. In some instances the buried is indeed consigned to oblivion; in others it is in fact given up to repetition and reinheritance.

If I were to try to phrase the principal thesis of this study—a hazardous proposition, to be sure, since a number of diverse theses come together here—I would say 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. And since I will be referring to the human rather often in these pages, let me put forward a premise here to the effect that humanity is not a species (*Homo sapiens* is a species); it is a way of being mortal and relating to the dead. To be human means above all to bury. Vico suggests as much when he reminds us that “*humanitas* in Latin comes first and properly from *humando*, burying” (*New Science* §12). By *properly* he means essentially and irreducibly. And if I have mentioned Vico more than once already it is because his *New Science* (1744) is the major inspiration for this study. Certainly it was Vico who first helped me understand how the human is bound up with the humus and why burial figures as the generative institution of human nature, taking the word *nature* in its full etymological sense (from *nasci*, “to be born”). As *Homo sapiens* we are born of our biological parents. As human beings we are born of the dead—of the regional ground they occupy, of the languages they inhabited, of the worlds they brought into being, of the many institutional, legal, cultural, and psychological legacies that, through us, connect them to the unborn. Vico’s thinking on the nature of this dominion is full of unrealized potential for self-knowledge in its broad historical scope. If my book does not take the form of a conventional commentary on his work, it is because sometimes the best way to

retrieve a legacy is by freeing it from its original framework and reinscribing it in new ones. Today Vico needs heirs more than commentators.

Before turning this book over to its audience I would like to state that it is above all a reader's book. Some books are writers' books, in that their authors undertake the largest share of the labor, do most of the thinking, circumscribe (as much possible) the horizon of reference, and draw the final conclusions. *The Dominion of the Dead* is different. It is more like a net than a cloth. Its articulation is full of empty spaces for the reader to enter and wander about in. It calls on its interlocutor not only to think along with the author but to establish independent connections, leap over abysses, pursue his or her own paths of inquiry, bring to bear adventitious considerations, and, through the tracings offered here, discover the topic for him- or herself. Given its intrinsic limitations (of which I am all too aware), I have tried to turn my approach into one that opens rather than closes the horizon of speculation. The result is a book that only the reader can finish writing.

NOTE ON REFERENCES

The following book does not contain numbered footnotes or endnotes. Notes and references have been placed in separate sections, “Notes” and “Works Cited,” at the back of the volume.

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CHAPTER 1

THE EARTH AND ITS DEAD

One of the blessings of our planet, along with life itself, is that it allows for the disposal of its dead. The characters in a Jules Verne story realize to what extent they, like us, take that circumstance for granted after they eject a dead dog from their space capsule, only to find that the dog (named Satellite) faithfully follows them on their journey toward the moon—a veritable satellite holding close to the rocket as it travels through empty space. The dead like to stay close to the living, to be sure, yet not in this nondisposable fashion. To realize their fate and become truly dead they must first be made to disappear. It is only because their bodies have a place to go that their souls or images or words may attain an afterlife of sorts among the living. We should be infinitely grateful, therefore, for the hiding and receiving power of this terraqueous globe, which Michel Serres, reflecting on the image of Jules Verne's dog, rightly calls "a tabernacle, a receptacle for all decompositions" (*Statues*, p. 39).

Nietzsche once declared: "Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type" (*Gay Science* [§109], p. 168). Certainly to the degree that its heavy elements were formed by the death of stars—the so-called supernovae—our planet as a whole, like all solid bodies in the universe, is a species of what is dead. Yet its biosphere—host to such an abundance of life—is necrogenic in an even more pertinent sense. Through the action of fire the corpse gives itself up to air; through inhumation or simple putrefaction it returns its composite substance to the earth; through the force of gravity it sinks into the sea's underworlds. Whatever biomass it receives after the extinction of life becomes part of the planet's receiving matter—matter from which life, its imponderable origins, in turn emerges. Because the earth has reabsorbed the dead into its elements for so many millions upon millions of years, who can

any longer tell the difference between receptacle and contents? Take away the millennial residues that consecrate them, human or otherwise, and our waters, forests, deserts, mountains, and clouds would lose the spirit that moves in and across their visible natures.

Human bodies, when they perish, share in this organic afterlife of the dead. They are “rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, / with rocks, and stones, and trees,” to speak with Wordsworth. The human returns to the humus, to be sure, yet the fact that Wordsworth wrote those verses at all or that we revisit their utterance over a century and half later shows that human culture, unlike nature, institutes a living memory, and not just a mineral retention, of the dead. Culture is the condensed residue of such perpetuation, unless we prefer to think of it as the nonorganic residue-forming process itself.

We know by now that in the great span of geological time, human history figures as no more than the briefest, evanescent instant; yet it is in that self-sedimenting instant that we nevertheless dwell insofar as we are human. If to be human means to translate our mortality into history, as I believe it does, then one could say that the ethos or dwelling place of humanity remains mortal time, which we transmute into historical durations that are themselves radically finite. We are through and through temporal, that is, finite, in our mode of being. Even our perception of space is thoroughly temporal in character. Immanuel Kant claimed as much when he threw up a barrier between the noumenal realm of nature, unknowable in itself, and the world as it appears to us phenomenally, through the so-called pure intuitions of space and time. I invoke Kant here because, according to him, while all our sense data is spatialized and temporalized by these two a priori forms, there is an important difference between them. In addition to determining our perception of the external world, time also determines the immediately experienced flow of our inner lives: “Time is nothing but the form of inner sense, i.e., of the intuiting we do of ourselves and of our inner state. . . . Time is the formal a priori condition of all appearances generally. Space is the pure form of all outer appearances; as such it is limited, as an a priori condition, to just outer appearances intuitions” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 88). In short, our access to the world passes through the temporal flow of human consciousness. This ex-

plains why even our perception of space is temporal and, I would add, mortal in nature.

Unlike music and poetry, whose rhythms participate in, arise out of, or echo the flow itself, most visual artworks cannot directly represent the temporal flow of our inner lives, precisely because they are committed to the spatialization of form and the formalization of space. As for architecture, it belongs to a category of its own. Insofar as it builds the worlds we dwell in, architecture actually *creates* the places where human time, in its historical and existential modes, takes place. Such places—be they homes, buildings, cities, or landscapes—are recesses of mortal time in which we go about inhabiting the earth historically rather than merely naturally. One could say that, in its world-forming capacity, architecture transforms geological time into human time, which is another way of saying it turns matter into meaning. That is why the sight of ruins is such a reflexive and in some cases unsettling experience. Ruins in an advanced state of ruination represent, or better they literally embody, the dissolution of meaning into matter. By revealing what human building ultimately is up against—natural or geological time—ruins have a way of recalling us to the very ground of our human worlds, namely the earth, whose foundations are so solid and so reliable that they presumably will outlast any edifices that we build on them.

Precisely because it is the faculty that schematizes our intuition of time, the human imagination is also able to conceive images of the end of time. Or perhaps we are so governed by its law and so haunted by its implications that we can't help but project our finitude onto the cosmos in apocalyptic visions of ultimate cessation. Take one of oldest English poems to have come down to us, entitled "The Wanderer," which contains an extended meditation on Roman ruins in the early medieval English landscape. Evoking the implacable, destructive forces of nature, especially of the sea, whose "storms break on the stone hillside," wearing down the earth's solid mass, the poem concludes with a hyperbolic projection of the past's ruination into an ultimate, ultratemporal future: "In earth's realm all is crossed; Weird's will changeth the world. Wealth is lent us, friends are lent us, man is lent, kin is lent; *all this earth's frame shall stand empty*" (Alexander, *Earliest English Poems*, p. 51). Here a landscape of retrospection sponsors a transhuman or even inhuman vi-

sion of the eschaton, understood not only as the end of history but as the surcease of the earth itself—that same earth where history’s ruins leave behind their trace. A truly extreme or self-consuming vision of annihilation takes the form of the earth’s demise, for the forces of destruction, when pushed to their cosmic extreme in the human imagination, not only destroy all that human labor builds in time, they also destroy the supporting element of time, namely the land on which we erect our worlds.

In the eschatological imagination where such visions are born, earth and sea belong to different, even opposing orders. In its solidity and stability the earth is inscribable, we can build upon its ground, while the sea offers no such foothold for human worldhood. No doubt that is why the sea, in its hostility to architecturally or textually imprinted memory, often figures as the imaginary agent of ultimate obliteration. When John describes the eschaton at the end of the Book of Revelation he evokes the architectural marvel of the new Jerusalem and, in an exalted rhetoric, speaks of a “new earth” and “new heaven.” He then declares, almost as an aside: “And the sea was no more” (21:1). The demise of the sea here signifies the final victory of providential history over its antagonistic element. For Revelation does not project the absolute ruin of human history, as “The Wanderer” poem does; on the contrary, it foresees the fulfillment of history and final perfection of time. In the plenitude of time—given the anthropotheistic tradition to which this vision belongs—the sea is bound to disappear.

In other types of eschatological visions, where it is the earth as such that succumbs to ruin, it is the sea that emerges as the victor. Consider a poem by Swinburne, entitled “A Forsaken Garden,” which shows the extent to which the human imagination is able to strain against the bounds of its own conditions of possibility. The first of its ten stanzas sets the scene for the poetic meditation that follows:

In a coign of the cliff between lowland and highland,
 At the sea-down’s edge between windward and lee,
 Walled round with rocks as an inland island,
 The ghost of a garden fronts the sea.
 A girdle of brushwood and thorn encloses
 The steep square slope of the blossomless bed

Where the weeds that grew green from the graves of its roses
Now lie dead.

In such heavy anapests the anonymous third-person speaker goes on to describe the garden's desolation, its paths overgrown with weeds, its dilapidated structures, its bygone roses reduced to thorns. The ruined landscape lies exposed now to the remorseless abrasion of wind, storm, and sun. The speaker goes on to imagine two lovers wandering among the once blossoming garden paths a hundred years earlier, only to conclude that "love deep as the sea as a rose must wither." The poem ends as follows:

All are at one now, roses and lovers,
Not known of the cliffs and the fields and the sea.
Not a breath of the time that has been hovers
In the air now soft with a summer to be,
Not a breath shall there sweeten the seasons hereafter
Of the flowers or the lovers that laugh now or weep,
When as they that are free now of weeping and laughter
We shall sleep.

Here death may not deal again for ever;
Here change may come not till all change end.
From the graves they have made they shall rise up never,
Who have left nought living to ravage and rend.
Earth, stones, and thorns of the wild ground growing,
While the sun and the rain live, these shall be;
Till a last wind's breath upon all these blowing
Roll the sea.

Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,
Till the terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,
Till the strength of the waves of the high tides humble
The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,
Here now in his triumph where all things falter,
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,
As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,
Death lies dead.

(Swinburne, pp. 210–13)

foundation for their perspectives, just as they need an earthly foundation for their buildings. The inhuman nature of the sea—of the *this* in the middle of which you cannot stand yet from within which the poem situates its speech act, precisely in the act of saying *this*—is revealed as the poem sinks beneath the water’s phenomenal surface in the final verses:

men lower their nets, unconscious of the fact that they are
desecrating a grave,
and row quickly away—the blades of the oars
moving together like the feet of water spiders as if there were
no such thing as death.
The wrinkles progress among themselves in a phalanx—
beautiful under
networks of foam,
and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of the
seaweed;
the birds swim through the air at top speed, emitting catcalls
as heretofore—
the tortoise shell scourges about the feet of the cliff, in motion
beneath them;
and the ocean, under the pulsation of lighthouses and noise of
bell buoys,
advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in which
dropped things are
bound to sink—
in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor
consciousness.

(Moore, *Complete Poems*, pp. 49–50)

The light and descriptive texture of these verses makes the abyss whose surface they float upon all the more sinister in its nihilism. Moore’s poem is in many ways more perturbing than Swinburne’s in that it involves no hyperbolic temporal projections. The “neither-nor” of its conclusion—“neither with volition nor consciousness”—uncovers the end time in the everyday presence of the sea, whose brilliant surface veils an underworld of extinction in which no spirits carry on an afterlife. The poem perturbs in another way as well, for if the sea’s sub-

surface element marks the limit of volition and consciousness, what are we to make of the men who are *unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave* when they lower their nets? Confined to their superficial perspective, caught up in their daily activities “as if there were no such thing as death,” are they not in some sense dead to the mortality that defines their condition? Is it only by looking deliberately into the abyss of what we stand in the middle of that we come alive to the world? And is that what poetry is in Moore’s concept of its vocation—a transphenomenal way of looking that sees an inhuman darkness beneath the phenomena themselves?

I would invoke here another remarkable poem, authored by the contemporary poet Eleanor Wilner. Like several other poems in her collection *Reversing the Spell* (1998), this one, entitled “Reading the Bible Backwards,” envisions the reversal or undoing of the Creation story told in Genesis. What it describes is a redemption, not of history but of nature, a redemption that takes the form of a universal flood that would “reverse the spell” of human history’s disasters and tragedies by submerging history’s elemental correlative altogether. After describing in extraordinary visual imagery the sea’s slow and deliberate inundation of the earth, the poem concludes as follows:

Now nothing but the wind

moves in the rain-pocked face
of the swollen waters, though far below
where the giant squid lie hidden in shy tangles,
the whales, heavy-bodied as angels,
their fins like vestiges of wings,
sing some mighty epic of their own—

a great day when ships would all withdraw
the harpoons fail of their aim, the land
dissolve into the waters, and they would swim
among the peaks of the mountains, like
eagles of the deep, while far below them, the old
nightmares of earth would settle
into silt among the broken cities, the empty
basket of the child would float

abandoned in the seaweed until the work of water
 unraveled it in filaments of straw,
 till even that straw rotted
 in the planetary thaw the whales prayed for,
 sending their jets of water skyward
 in the clear conviction they'd spill back
 to ocean with their will accomplished
 in the miracle of the rain: *And the earth
 was without form and void, and darkness
 was upon the face of the deep. And
 the Spirit moved upon the face of the waters.*

(pp. 156–57)

It is a prehuman and prehistorical Spirit that answers the prayers of the whales here. An earth without form after the end of the world is humanly inconceivable, since we are creatures of form and perspective; yet this is as close as we will get to an image of its pre- or postformal facticity—even if, or perhaps even because, the image traffics in multiple perspectives and contains a number of anthropomorphisms. Epics, prayers, convictions, accomplished wills are all attributed to the liberated whales, whose ecstatic deliverance from human oppression we share in here only through the poem's humanization.

Wilner's image of restored formlessness reveals, meanwhile, that the form the earth takes under the dominion of humans brings only death and enslavement to its other creatures, and mostly misery to the offenders. For Wilner the sins of the seed of Adam are sins against nature, not God, hence the guilt of history is neither punishable nor atonable. It is only oblivionable through the miracle of the rain. If history is at bottom a natural disaster, the general extinction of human volition and consciousness in a sea that preexisted the anthropogenic nightmare is the accomplishment of an elemental, planetary will. Wilner's sympathy with—and personification of—such a will is of course deeply human in its impulse insofar as it turns against the impulse of history. Such a turn is itself historical in nature, even and especially when it projects a diluvian, humanly depopulated universe that is at once beyond, below, and above history as we know it. And who knows whether the end of time, if and when it were ever to come about, would in fact be the accomplish-

ment of a *human*, not natural, will? I mean the death drive that lurks at the heart of history itself.

Let us query one more text about the sea, this one in prose, authored by someone who actually earned his living on it for several years before going on to become a writer. Joseph Conrad's book *The Mirror of the Sea* describes a very different kind of ruin from the sort I have discussed so far. This work of nonfiction, composed in 1904–6, a decade or so after he retired from his seafaring career with the British merchant marine, contains a loosely interwoven series of reflections on seamanship. Conrad, we recall, never set eyes on the sea while growing up in Poland, yet as a young boy he was seized by an irrepressible desire to become a seaman. It was a wildly romantic fantasy that he had occasion to realize when, at age 17, he left for France and enlisted in the French merchant marine. Chapter 36 of *The Mirror of the Sea* recounts what Conrad called his "initiation," an incident early in his career that caused him to lose his youthful illusions about the sea. On a calm and luminous morning in the mid-Atlantic, "when the might of the sea indeed appears lovable," the crew aboard the ship on which he was serving as junior officer spotted the ruins of a brig on the horizon—a fragment of a ship, smashed up and completely demasted. When they discovered through the binoculars that there were men aboard it waving rags at them, a silent yet frantic "race against time" got under way as the ship's two rowboats set out toward the wreck across a languorous and becalmed sea. It was a race on both sides of the placid divide, for while the men in the rescue boats pulled at their oars with superhuman efforts, their brothers on the Danish brig were working at the pumps, "bowing from the waist to each other in their back-breaking labour." They won the race, but only barely.

The survivors had been adrift for weeks, working the pumps day and night after their ship had sprung a leak and broken apart in a hurricane. Their travails had reduced them to an almost inhuman condition. As the rowboats made their way back to the mother ship with their human booty, the rescued captain of the brig suddenly "stood up with a low exclamation." Conrad:

He was steadying himself on my shoulder with a strong grip, while his other arm, flung up rigidly, pointed a denunciatory finger at

the immense tranquility of the ocean. After his first exclamation, which stopped the swing of our oars, he made no sound, but his whole attitude seemed to cry out an indignant "Behold!" . . . I could not imagine what vision of evil had come upon him. I was startled, and the amazing energy of his immobilized gesture made my heart beat faster with the anticipation of something monstrous and unsuspected. The stillness around us became crushing.

Let's freeze the Danish captain in his demonstrative gesture for a moment and remark that he is pointing to the *this* in the middle of which one cannot stand. The account continues:

Something startling, mysterious, hastily confused was taking place. I watched it with incredulous and fascinated awe, as one watches the confused, swift movements of some deed of violence done in the dark. As if at a given signal, the run of the smooth undulations seemed checked suddenly around the brig. By a strange optical delusion the whole sea appeared to rise upon her in one overwhelming heave of its silky surface where in one spot a smother of foam broke out ferociously. And then the effort subsided. It was all over, and the smooth swell ran on as before from the horizon in uninterrupted cadence of motion, passing under us with a slight friendly toss of the boat. Far away, where the brig had been, an angry white stain undulating on the surface of steely-gray waters, shot with gleams of green, diminished swiftly without a hiss, like a patch of pure snow melting in the sun. And the great stillness after this initiation into the sea's implacable hate seemed full of dread thoughts and shadows of disaster. (*The Mirror of the Sea*, pp. 257–58)

This was Conrad's initiation into the sea's irresponsibility, its refusal or inability to respond to human appeal. On that day he realized that "the sea has no generosity. No display of manly qualities—courage, hardihood, endurance, faithfulness—has ever been known to touch its irresponsible consciousness of power" (p. 251). In short, he realized that the sea is unearthly. Whereas the earth sympathizes with human virtue, in the sense that it rewards backbreaking labor with generous harvests, or gives us the ground on which to build our destinies, com-

memorate our achievements, and honor our dead, the sea is dumb to human petition. It defies any and all humanization. “The amazing wonder of the deep,” writes Conrad, “is its unfathomable cruelty” (p. 259).

The insight into this cruelty comes at the climactic moment when the sea swallows and covers up all traces of the floating ruin. The shocking or “monstrous” aspect of this spectacle consists in the sheer punctuality of the brig’s demise as it disappears “swiftly without a hiss,” leaving only a “smother of foam” at the spot where it sank. The eschatological erasure that Swinburne’s and Wilner’s poems envision over the course of geological time here takes place locally and in an instant. We are thankful to the sea that, unlike empty space, it receives, hides, and reabsorbs the dead. It is its passion for erasure that makes it inhuman. Erasure does not mean disappearance only; it means that the site of disappearance remains unmarkable. There are no gravestones on the sea. History and memory ground themselves on inscription, but this element is uninscribable. It closes over rather than keeps the place of its dead, while its unbounded grave remains humanly unmarked.

As for the loved ones of those who sink into its unfathomable grave, they suffer a special form of anguish. Before embarking on the *Pequod*, Ishmael visits the Whaleman’s Chapel in Nantucket and reflects on the numerous marble tablets inscribed in commemoration of so many whalers who never made it home. The chapel is full of women who “wear the countenance if not the trappings of some unceasing grief” (Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 130). Their grief is unceasing in that it lies at an enormous, untraversable remove from their husbands’ remains, almost as if the intimacy of human time at the heart of natural time depended on keeping one’s dead close by, within an earthly realm of presence. Ishmael exclaims: “Oh! ye whose dead lie buried beneath the green grass; who standing among flowers can say—here, *here* lies my beloved, ye know not the desolation that broods in hearts like these” (ibid.). Even as they commemorate those who perished at sea—“This marble is placed here by their surviving shipmates,” “This tablet is erected to his memory by his widow,” and so on—the inscriptions only aggravate the cause of so much anguish, confirming and, as it were, sealing the un-earthly exile of the seamen in question. Hence Ishmael’s reaction: “What bitter blanks in those black-bordered marbles which cover no ashes. What despair in those immovable inscriptions! What deadly

voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrection to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave" (ibid.). The very hypothesis of resurrection depends on an earth that receives and holds the place of our mortal remains. It is almost as if these frigid testaments were written in water, for it is the vast and inhuman sea that wells up in the empty space between the words and lines chiseled into the memorial stones, whose placement in the chapel has no effective bearing on their adventitious horizon of reference. Ishmael: "As well might those tablets stand in the cave of Elephanta as here" (p. 52).

But let us return to the Danish captain who stood up in the rescue boat and pointed to the spot where his ruined ship was sinking beneath the surface of a calm yet treacherous sea. If it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing, it is human nature also to mark the passage from life to death in some way—to give meaning to the matter of it, as it were—even when, as in this case, it is a ship, and not its mates, that dies. It was left to the captain to answer the ship's passing with passing words:

The captain of the brig lowered his rigid arm slowly, and looked at our faces in a solemnly conscious silence, which called on us to share in his simple-minded, marvelling awe. All at once he sat down by my side, and leaned forward earnestly at my boat's crew, who, swinging together in a long, easy stroke, kept their eyes fixed upon him faithfully.

"No ship could have done so well," he addressed them firmly, after a moment of strained silence, during which he seemed with trembling lips to seek for words fit to bear such high testimony. "She was small, but she was good. I had no anxiety. She was strong. Last voyage I had my wife and two children in her. No other ship could have stood so long the weather she had to live through for days and days before we got dismasted a fortnight ago. She was fairly worn out, and that's all. You may believe me. She lasted under us for days and days, but she could not last for ever. It was long enough. I am glad it is over. No better ship was left to sink at sea on such a day as this." (Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*, p. 258)

Conrad remarks that there was "nothing wanting" in the captain's improvised "funeral oration"—"neither piety nor faith, nor the tribute

of praise due to the worthy dead”—and that “by the merits of his sea-wise forefathers and by the artlessness of his heart, he was made fit to deliver this excellent discourse” (ibid.). Brought forth by the captain’s human breath, that discourse would have dissipated in the air and been forgotten long ago by now had Conrad not written down its intent for us. Indeed, *The Mirror of the Sea* as a whole could be read as an expansive dilation of the captain’s “excellent discourse,” given the book’s stated intention to honor the dead—be they seamen of the past or the worthy ships in which they had served. In his author’s note of 1919, Conrad declares that “this book . . . is the best tribute my piety can offer to the ultimate shapers of my character, convictions, and, in a sense, destiny—to the imperishable sea, to the ships that are no more, and to the simple men who have had their day” (p. 135).

That is why I believe that the other equally inexplicable and improbable drive that defined Conrad’s life—I mean his drive to become a writer—had its genesis in the initiation incident described in chapter 36. The sea is indeed imperishable, but “the act of blackening pages,” as he called it, was Conrad’s act of piety toward the perishable—his response to the sea’s irresponsibility, its hostility to memory, its impatience with ruins, and its passion for erasure. In the final analysis Conrad’s career as a writer represents his allegiance to the earth, not the sea, for the earth is our ultimate stone, tablet, or inscribable page. The words on Keats’s grave in the Protestant cemetery of Rome—“here lies one whose name was writ in water”—were not written in water but on a headstone that continues to hold the place of its reference. Just as we build on the earth, so too we write in its element, regardless of the medium.

With the exception of Eleanor Wilner, all of the authors whose testaments I have visited here are dead. This is evidence enough that the act of blackening the page constitutes a gift of the dead to the future. Even if the “bleak tablets” in the Whaleman’s Chapel “sympathetically cause the old wounds to bleed afresh” (Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 51) in the widows who obsessively return to their inscriptions, *Moby Dick*, as a gift of literature, recalls the irreducibly human character of those wounds. In giving voice to the wound of mortality itself, literature houses or gives a home to even the most desolate kinds of grief. It gives us *back* that which we keep on losing, namely a cognizance or recognizance of our pas-

sionate and mortal natures. Hence the intrinsically posthumous character of the literary voice, which I insist on time and again throughout these pages. Works of literature, then, are more than enduring tablets where an author's words survive his or her demise. They are the gifts of human worlds, cosmic in nature, that hold their place in time so that the living and the unborn may inhabit them at will, make themselves at home in their articulate humanity—all thanks to the ultimate gift of the earth, which renders their testaments possible.

If the intuition of time is in fact schematized by the imagination, as Kant believed, then one could say that these various visions of ruin and annihilation I have reviewed—be they imaginary or real—throw the imagination back upon its source in human finitude. Ruins are in that regard apocalyptic, or revelatory. As images of posteriority they reveal the primordially of the temporal law that holds sway over their obsolescence. Certainly in some of the visions I have discussed, ruins and the sea have at least this much in common: just as ruins have outlasted the worlds to which they once belonged, the sea will outlast the earth on which they stand. Yet I believe this is an anticorrelation, in the way the Antichrist is a false or deceptive semblance of Christ. The spectacle of ruins reveals the fact of destruction, yet at the same time it also reveals the fact of survival—the survival not so much of the ruins themselves as of the earth on which they stand or fall. I have insisted from the start that this is the true correlation: time and earth. While human worlds in their built character succumb to the law of finitude, the earth where they lay their foundations, and where the law finds itself at home, persists. It persists not merely as the material substrate of human dwelling but as the elemental correlative of the coffer from which human beings retrieve their legacies from out of their futures. History is made of and written into this conservative element that outlasts its bygone worlds even as it allows for the opening of crypts and folds of human time in the midst of nature's transcendence.

If the issue is the persistence *of* time and not persistence *in* time, and if time has an earthly correlate, then one could say that the sight of ruins in a landscape offers images of the postdiluvian covenant between God and humankind. When Abraham Lincoln ends his famous address at Gettysburg with the words “shall not perish from the earth,” he declares his faith in the founding idea of the American republic, yet at the

same time he confesses a much more basic faith in the providential ground of history, namely the earth, which is the basis for the durability of any nation whatsoever. This address, which I reflect on more fully in the next chapter, makes sense only on the basis of his trust in the covenant. Yet in truth there is nothing in this covenant that stipulates the eternity of the earth; on the contrary, the covenant holds, says Genesis, “as long as the earth endures.” In its full articulation: “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease” (8:22). Who knows anymore how long the earth will endure or what the covenant demands of us?

If we understand the covenant not so much as a contract between God and man as between man and earth—for it is the latter contract, I believe, that lies at the basis of the former—then we can speak of something like humankind’s obligations toward the earth, as well as its failures to meet those obligations. I speak here not so much of the planet in its material determination as of the humic earth, which will endure as the elemental correlative of human history only as long as history itself endures. When history turns against its own memorializing and self-conserving drive, when it is perceived to have become a force of erasure rather than of inscription, of assault on the earth rather than humanization of the earth, then images of an apocalyptic sea inevitably surge up in the human imagination. Such images remind us that history exists in a covenant that has a history of its own, and a finite one at that; and remind us furthermore that only an ever-vigilant awareness of the covenant’s finitude assures its perpetuity.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT IS A HOUSE?

According to an ancient strain in Western philosophy, a knowledge of essences figures as the precondition for making; thus the house builder must know what a house is before going about the business of building one. Such knowledge is both theoretical and practical, yet it is not necessarily reflective, at least not in the way philosophy presumes to be reflective. The question in my chapter title is intended reflectively. It does not sound like one, yet it may well be *the* philosophical question of our time—a time when traditional philosophy, or so we are told, has come to an end, leaving us confused about who or where we are, insofar as we are human. Heidegger believed that the confusion stems from modern homelessness; indeed, that modernity and homelessness are at some level necessary correlates. Even if that is true (*dato non concessio*), is the correlation itself amenable to domestication? Is something like the housing of modern homelessness conceivable? What would such housing look like? On what foundations would it rest? What would it shelter? These are questions that we cannot begin to answer until we first clarify, in a reflective way, the essence of a house.

To which philosophers can we turn for help? To Heidegger himself? Certainly he did not make things any easier on his commentators when, in his “Letter on Humanism,” after enigmatically declaring that “language is the house of Being,” he went on to caution that his dictum should not be taken metaphorically: “The talk about the house of Being is no transfer of the image ‘house’ to Being. But one day we will, by thinking the essence of Being in a way appropriate to its matter, more readily be able to think what ‘house’ and ‘to dwell’ are” (*Basic Writings*, pp. 236–37). This is an astonishing piece of reasoning, even for Heidegger, who frequently reasons backwards. It is not by thinking the essence of being more appropriately that we will come to know what a

house is; if anything, it is by thinking the essence of a house that we will come to know what being is.

Let us begin with an anthropological fact that, when we reflect on it, unsettles our everyday conception of the house as natural shelter or dwelling place: human beings housed their dead before they housed themselves. Lewis Mumford puts it well in the opening pages of *The City in History*: “Mid the uneasy wanderings of paleolithic man, the dead were the first to have a permanent dwelling: a cavern, a mound marked by a cairn, a collective barrow. These were landmarks to which the living probably returned at intervals, to commune with or placate the ancestral spirits” (p. 7). Mumford’s summary statement, to the effect that “the city of the dead antedates the city of the living . . . is the forerunner, almost the core, of every living city” (ibid.), is reminiscent of Fustel de Coulanges’s argument that the ancient house (on whose foundations rested the ancient city) had its origins in ancestor worship. The Greek and Roman house typically featured an altar on which burned the sacred fire of the so-called *lares*. The *lares* were ancestral spirits associated with the hearth, just as the *manes* were spirits linked to the ancestral graves.

And then there were the *penates*, household gods closely related the *lares*. The word *penate* is etymologically akin to *penitus*, meaning “inwardly, in the innermost part, deep inside.” More directly it is connected to the word *penus*—the cellar or cupboard inside of which perishable provisions and victuals were stored and preserved. The origins of this association of the *penates* with the storage place for victuals are obscure, yet the *penates*, or gods of the pantry, may well have been the source of provisions in the *penus*, since the dead inhabited the soil from which came the harvests. Be that as it may, for Fustel de Coulanges the ancient house was first and foremost an institution by which, or in which, the dead were lodged and preserved in their being. To be at home meant to reside within the blessing sphere of the sacred fire, in and through which the dead maintained a presence among the living. The latter thought of the hearth not as a fireplace but as the glowing coals on their altars; they thought of the house’s shelter not so much as a defense against the elements but as the ancestor’s awesome power to protect the family against misfortune and calamity. A house, in sum, was

a place where two realms—one under and the other on the earth—interpenetrated each other.

We no longer think of the house in the ancient way; yet even if we find it difficult to phrase exactly how we *do* think of it, we nevertheless know, more or less, what we want or expect or need from our houses. I cannot imagine, for example, that an architect would design a house without windows. Can we even imagine a house without windows? Yes, but we would say of it that it is more like a tomb than a house. It is appropriate for the dead to inhabit such confined spaces in which they are protected from the bluster of the world (and the world from them), but we the living make other demands on our homes. In the same way that we expect a coffin to be as hermetically sealed as possible, we expect a house to open onto its surroundings. We require or desire that it contain within its space the presence of what is external to its walls. Thanks to its windows, yet thanks also to its enclosure, a house differentiates the inside from the outside space in such a way that, in and through such differentiation, it creates a relation between interior and exterior whose dynamic field of interpenetration the dwellers inhabit. How now? Is a house something that combines the closure of the tomb and the openness of nature? Is it, even for us, essentially a halfway house, a site of intersection between these two realms?

Nature has shelters, recesses, caves, and burrows, yet it has no houses in which the being (and not only the vestiges) of the bygone is preserved. A fox in its den finds itself in nature, yet we in our houses find ourselves both inside and outside of nature. A mouse that makes its home inside a house is *in* the house in some literal sense, but it does not inhabit the house in the human or humic mode. To inhabit the world humanly one must be a creature of legacy. That explains why the living housed the dead before they housed themselves. They placed them in graves, coffins, urns—in any case they placed them *in* something that we call their resting place so that their legacies could be retrieved and their afterlives perpetuated.

The retrieval and perpetuation by which humankind creates a memory and opens its future take place primarily within the human house. The “in” that the dead abide in—whether it be in the earth, in our memory, in our institutions, in our genes, in our words, in our books, in

our dreams, in our hearts, in our prayers, or in our thoughts—this “in” of the dead’s indwelling defines the human interiority which our houses build walls around and render inhabitable. The domestic interior is thus in some fundamental sense mortuary, inhabited not only by the dead but also by the unborn in their projective potentiality. It is because we are the ligature between the dead and the unborn—and not because we are vulnerable to the elements and predators—that we humans require housing. All of which corroborates the following proposition: A house is a place of insideness in the openness of nature where the dead, through the care of the living, perpetuate their afterlives and promote the interests of the unborn.

In the history of Western philosophy there is only one thinker whose vocation *as a philosopher* took the form of building a house—not the “house of Being,” but a house to live in: Henry David Thoreau. In 1845 Thoreau went into the Walden woods to discover what exactly a house is through the act of making one, as if to declare allegiance to the Vichian principle that we can only know what we ourselves have made (*verum et factum convertuntur*). When it comes to our question, then, Thoreau enjoys the special authority of someone who not only built a house from the ground up but who also built a philosophy on that act of edification. Thoreau’s answer is at once trivial and astonishing. In *Walden* he speaks of food, clothing, and housing in terms of their literal function in the economy of survival: to nourish and preserve the body’s “vital heat.” That much seems trivial. What is astonishing is that the primordial house of man is his shirt: “I believe that all races at some seasons wear something equivalent to the shirt. . . . Our shirts are our liber or true bark, which cannot be removed without girding and so destroying the man” (p. 16). Thoreau invariably speaks literally, but he never speaks only literally, which is why we could take his remark to mean that a man lives *inside* something which is not his body but which is as con-natural to the body as the bark is to the tree, hence that human beings are not naked, merely instinctive creatures, but creatures who inhabit recesses of time in which the past is carried forward into the future. For it is unlikely that Thoreau uses the word *liber* redundantly, to mean “bark,” without evoking the word’s other meaning of “book,” thereby suggesting that our shirts, and by extension our houses, are linked to

our possession of language and memory in their futural projections (a “liber” is a record book).

We live inside our shirts because our vital heat is more than a natural heat. It is an inward human heat akin to—perhaps even the source of—the sacred fire that burned on the altars of the ancient house. Both perpetuating and perpetuated, it shelters and requires shelter in turn. Hence Thoreau’s disquieting remark: “How can a man be a philosopher and not maintain his vital heat by better methods than other men?” (p. 10) *Walden* is, among other things, a “discourse on method” about how to nourish that vital heat. The allusion to Descartes is not casual, for Thoreau’s vital heat is strangely akin to the mystical heat that emanated from the stove in the small room in Germany where, during the religious wars, René Descartes experienced his visionary insight into the method for pursuing truth. It was in the full grace of such a heat that Descartes composed his *Meditations*, seated near a fireplace, doubting the sensations that came to him from without, but certain of the thinking self that thought the fire within. Just as Thoreau’s vital heat is the descendant of Descartes’s great fire of the First Meditation, so too the latter—whether it burned inside or outside the sanctuary of the thinking self—is the modern descendant of the fire by which Heraclitus warmed himself in his humble kitchen, much to the astonishment of a group of curious visitors, the likes of which would drop by Thoreau’s cabin at Walden from time to time. “Here too the gods are present,” Heraclitus is reported to have declared on that occasion, alluding no doubt to the *lares*. Those gods take up residence in a place (be it the soul, mind, self, memory, or logos) that philosophy, through its various methods, seeks to know in its ultimate foundations. It is astonishing how few philosophers in the long history of Western metaphysics—including Heidegger—came even close to suspecting what the archives of cultural memory tell us unambiguously: that the dead underlie those foundations.

Thoreau declares, “I am not aware that any man has built on the spot which I occupy. Deliver me from a city built on the site of a more ancient city, whose materials are ruins, whose gardens cemeteries. The soil is blanched and accursed there, and before that becomes necessary the earth itself will be destroyed” (*Walden*, p. 175). The statement de-

finer, in the mode of revulsion, the ancient houses and cities built on the bones of the dead, or on the ruins of former, fallen cities. Under every Old World metropolis lies an older necropolis. Under Thoreau's self-built American house, by contrast, there were no bones—at least not that he was aware of. Nevertheless, no one will deny that it was crammed with ghosts: the ghosts of his Puritan ancestors, for example, whose gesture of departure across the Atlantic Thoreau repeated in his departure from Concord to the shores of Walden Pond. There were also several ghosts from classical and heroic literature that made a home there—the home-seeking Odysseus, for instance, or the refugee Aeneas looking to refound the House of Troy in a *terra nova* (in Thoreau's case, the house was American culture as such, and the *terra nova* was the American continent in its unrealized promise). There were the ghosts of romanticism as well, who had claimed Thoreau's imagination early on and who followed him into the woods. At Walden he encountered other less intimate ghosts—those of vanished “former inhabitants” who left behind them in the surrounding landscape subtle vestiges of their broken, unredeemed lives. And then there were the more aboriginal ghosts of the region—those of the Indians—whose spirit was inseparable from the land and waters of Walden, and whose bones probably haunted the subsoil of his house without his being explicitly aware of it. All these spiritual predecessors and presences—some internal, some external to the author's selfhood—were invited into the Walden cabin and into Thoreau's authorship. His house is where they congregated. His book is where they live on.

To the question “What is a house?” *Walden* gives only one frank and programmatic answer: “The house is still but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow” (p. 30). By *burrow* Thoreau means literally the cellar dug into the earth for the purpose of storing and conserving perishable provisions and victuals. Later in the book, precisely in the chapter that resurrects the ghosts of Walden's former inhabitants, he speaks of such burrows as the grave markers of the vanished houses that once populated the surrounding woods: “Now only a dent in the earth marks the site of these dwellings” (p. 174). These burrows are not quite pantries or kitchen cupboards, yet they serve the same purpose as the ancient *penus*: preservation. Was Thoreau aware of the connection to the *penates*, or gods of the pantry, when he defined the house in terms

of its cellar? All we know for sure is that he emphasizes the word *still* in his definition: the house is *still* but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow.

A visitor to Thoreau's cabin at Walden would have found it distinctly unencumbered by those sundry passed-on objects, mementos, and portraits in and through which a household's ghosts typically make their presence felt in the traditional domestic space, yet he or she would have noticed at least this much: a table with a few books on it, Greek and Roman classics no less, in their original (dead) languages. If nothing else, a house is a place to keep books in. Books require storage places because they themselves store time. They are places where the past comes to meet us from out of the future, provided we learn the art of reading—no easy task if we follow Thoreau's prescriptions. Certainly reading was Thoreau's primary act of edification at Walden. He read not antiquarianly but as part of his effort to invent a "father tongue" for his new nation. It was this effort that turned him toward the literatures of antiquity as the only source for such a pedagogy: "That age will be rich indeed when those relics which we call Classics, and the still older and more than classic but even less known Scriptures of the nations, shall have still further accumulated . . . and all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile we may hope to scale heaven at last" (p. 70). Of the ancient scriptures of nations Thoreau declares that they "are the only oracles which are not decayed, and there are such answers to the most modern inquiry in them as Delphi and Dodona never gave" (p. 68).

One of the lessons learned at Walden, and transcribed in *Walden*, is that the new must repose on, or literally *renew*, the foundations of the old. Unprecedented in its genre and idiom, Thoreau's book is comprehensible only on the basis of the traditions it transfigures in its retrievals. Thoreau conceives of the promise of American freedom not as liberation from legacy but as the freedom to become heirs to the "noblest recorded thoughts of man," which reach us from the depths of history. A house, or a nation, is where such inheritance takes place, which is why Thoreau's friend Emerson spoke about the "domestication of culture" as America's greatest challenge.

The burrow at the entrance of which Thoreau would have us build our houses as well as our nations is a cellar that leads into, and arises out

of, the underworld of the dead. It is no doubt *in* us as much as it is in the earth. To say that this burrow is *in* us means that it is the source of the unfolding interiorities the vital heat of which our shirts, houses, books, and words maintain through more or less efficient methods. Those interiorities allow us to hold our place in time and to give time its human as opposed to merely natural character. If human beings are “sojourners on the earth,” as Thoreau declared, it is because we domesticate our transience in historical, institutional, and linguistic modes that turn that transience in upon itself and make of it a force of conservation, a cellar or *penus*. In our houses time, in its stored or tumultuous character, makes itself historical. We don’t house ourselves because we speak, nor do we speak because we house ourselves; we house ourselves for the same reason that we speak—because we are a fold, a crypt, a wrinkle of insiderness in the fabric of nature’s externality. This insiderness exudes a vital heat which our houses, when they house us humanly, preserve.

...

When it comes to probing the modern fate of this burrow of interiority, no one is more relentless or compelling than Rainer Maria Rilke, the so-called poet of human inwardness. In one way or another his entire corpus speaks to the question of home and homelessness in the modern era. Thus he too, along with Thoreau, enjoys a special authority regarding our query. Now if we put to Rilke the question “What is a house?” we hardly know where to start, since his poetry expands the notion of a house so greatly as to include not only historical but also cosmic forces. As good a place as any to start is with *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, a prose work, autobiographical in nature, published in 1910, one of the most pivotal years in European modernism. Malte, the book’s protagonist, is a foreigner in Paris. He is lodged in a shoddy room, but he is in every other respect homeless, which is why the beggars, prostitutes, and street vagabonds seem to recognize him as one of their own—an outcast. Malte has a refuge from the street life of the city, however. It is the public library, whose glass door he opens “as if I were at home,” and whose books offer him a place to dwell in—offer him a hospitality that stands in contrast with the nihilism of the hospital, which throws its analogical shadow over the city of Paris from the opening sentences on: “So, then people do come here in order to live; I

would have sooner thought one died here. I have been out. I saw: hospitals" (p. 13). The library for Malte is an asylum from the hospital.

Today he is reading a poet who has "a quiet home in the mountains" and whose mahogany desk—or so Malte imagines—contains "faded letters and the loosened leaves of the diaries, recording birthdays, summer parties, birthdays." (p. 44). Imagining that house in his mind, Malte exclaims to himself: "Oh, what a happy fate, to sit in the quiet room of an ancestral house, among many calm, sedentary things. . . . And to think that I too would have become such a poet, had I been allowed to live somewhere, anywhere in the world, in one of those many closed-up country houses about which no one troubles. . . . There I would have lived with my old things, the family portraits, the books" (p. 44). But Malte is fated to become another kind of poet than the one he is reading—a homeless poet in a city which has undergone an uprooting and outcasting similar to his own. The estrangement that binds the poet's interiority to the city through which he wanders finds a powerful objective correlative in a wall that Malte comes across shortly after he leaves the library that day. The extended passage reads as follows:

Will anyone believe that there are such houses? . . . To be precise, they were houses that were no longer there. Houses that had been pulled down from top to bottom. What was there was the other houses, those that had stood alongside of them, tall neighboring houses. Apparently these were in danger of falling down, since everything alongside had been taken away; for a whole scaffolding of long, tarred timbers had been rammed slantwise between the rubbish-strewn ground and the bared wall. . . . [I]t was, so to speak, not the first wall of the existing houses (as one would have supposed), but the last of those that had been there. One saw its inner side. One saw at the different stories the walls of rooms to which the paper still clung, and here and there the join of floor or ceiling. Beside these room-walls there still remained, along the whole length of the wall, a dirty-white area, and through this crept in unspeakably disgusting motions, worm-soft and as if digesting, the open, rust-spotted channel of the water-closet pipe. Grey, dusty traces of the paths the lighting-gas had taken remained at the ceiling edges, and here and there, quite

unexpectedly, they bent sharp around and came running into the colored wall and into a hole that had been torn out black and ruthless. But most unforgettable of all were the walls themselves. The stubborn life of these rooms had not yet let itself be trampled out. It was still there; it clung to the nails that had been left, it stood on the remaining handsbreadth of flooring, it crouched under the corner joints where there was still a bit of interior. One could see that it was in the paint, which, year by year, it had slowly altered: blue into mouldy green, green into grey, and yellow into an old, stale rotting white. But it was also in the spots that had kept fresher, behind mirrors, pictures, and wardrobes; for it had drawn and redrawn their contours, and had been with spiders and dust even in these hidden places that now lay bared. It was in every flayed strip, it was in the damp blisters at the lower edges of the wallpapers; it wavered in the torn-off shreds, and sweated out of the foul patches that had come into being long ago. And from these walls once blue and green and yellow, which were framed by the fracture-tracks of the demolished partitions, the breath of these lives stood out—the clammy, sluggish, musty breath, which no wind had yet scattered. There stood the middays and the sicknesses and the exhaled breath and the smoke of years, and the sweat that breaks out under armpits and makes clothes heavy, and the stale breath of mouths, and the fusel odor of sweltering feet. There stood the tang of urine and the burn of soot and the grey reek of potatoes, and the heavy, smooth stench of ageing grease. The sweet-lingering smell of neglected infants was there, and the fear-smell of children who go to school, and the sultriness out of the beds of nubile youths. To these was added much that had come from below, from the abyss of the street, which reeked, and more that had oozed down from above with the rain, which over cities is not clean. And much the feeble, tamed domestic winds, that always stay in the same streets, had brought along; and much more was there, the source of which one did not know. I said, did I not, that all the walls had been demolished except the last?—It is of this wall I have been speaking all along. One would think I had stood a long time before it; but I'm willing to swear that I began to run as soon as I had recognized that wall. For that is the terrible

thing, that I did recognize it. I recognize everything here, and that is why it goes right into me: it is at home in me. (pp. 46–48)

The descriptive virtuosity of this passage, unmatched in all of modern literature, offers a concrete instance of language acting as the “house of Being,” even if in this case the house under description has been demolished. It is a house that did not know the secret of endurance, which is why it now seems so dead in its afterlife, despite all the tenacity with which what Malte calls “life” sticks to its vestigial wall. That tenacity is described meticulously, insistently, expansively, until the dilapidated “being” of the wall, in all its stubborn thingness, clings to the poet’s page like the life that refuses to abandon this remnant of a house that once was. As a result of the demolition process the wall’s interior has been exposed to the exterior. Such exposure is precisely what the writing accomplishes: the description lays bare the brutal domestic essence of the wall much the way the demolition has. Hence the distinctly “modern” character of this writing, in style and narrative declension as well as its representative participation in the historical processes that have destroyed the foundations of the old world and thereby left the human spirit homeless, or so Rilke believed, both inside and outside of our houses. In Rilke’s vision of history, the walls of our domestic containment have been torn down, leaving the “vital heat” of the human spirit exposed. Such exposure defines the spiritual fate of modernity as such. Under such conditions, the spirit is in need mostly of hospitals.

What does it mean for a wall that no longer houses anything to be at home in a poet who is essentially homeless? For let’s not forget that Malte is not like the poet who resides in an ancestral house; he is a poet whose inner life, just like the wall, lies open to the abrasive bluster of a world in full disaggregation (the Great War would erupt four years after *Malte Laurids Brigge* was published). Yet it is precisely through this shelterlessness, or new historical estrangement, that the work of rehousing the being of the old world must occur. Our homelessness must now transfigure our mode of inhabiting the earth in such a way as to allow a superannuated earth to inhabit us in turn. I am alluding here to Rilke’s cryptic doctrine, articulated in the *Duino Elegies*, to the effect that our cultural vocation in modern times must be that of gathering up our ob-

solete domestic relations with the earth into the exposed inwardness of the human soul. It is not only the poet's task, but also the task of culture as a whole, to offer the earth and its perishing human past a saving sanctuary. The only way to pull off such a rescue is by turning the hosted into the host, or the housed into the house. The following verses from the *Duino Elegies*, published in 1922, some twelve years after *Malte Laurids Brigge*, allude to this work of conversion:

The wanderer does not bring a handful of earth,
the unutterable, from the mountain slope to the valley,
but a pure word he has learned, the blue
and yellow gentian. Are we *here* perhaps just to say:
house, bridge, well, gate, jug, fruit tree, window—
at most column, tower . . . but to *say*, understand this, to say it
as the Things themselves never fervently thought to be

.

Here is the time for the *utterable, here*, its home.
Speak and acknowledge it. More than ever
the things that we can live by are falling away,
supplanted by an action without symbol.
An action beneath crusts that easily crack, as soon as
the inner working outgrows and otherwise limits itself

.

Praise the world to the angel, not the unutterable world
.
Tell him about the Things
.

And these things that live,
slipping away, understand that you praise them;
transitory themselves, they trust us for [their] rescue,
us, the most transient of all. They wish us to transmute them
in our invisible heart—oh, infinitely into us.

Whoever we are.

Earth, isn't this what you want: *invisibly*
to arise in us? Is it not your dream

Harrison, Robert Pogue. The Dominion of the Dead. Chicago, US: University of Chicago Press, 2010. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 22 June 2016.
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to be some day invisible? Earth! Invisible!
 What, if not transformation, is your insistent commission?

(*Duino Elegies*, pp. 69–71)

Rilke was neither a historian nor a sociologist but a poet in whom homelessness became a collective historical condition and a personal poetic vocation. He believed that he belonged to an age when the “visible earth” was falling away, slipping into oblivion, giving way to a new order of “virtual” reality, an age when an entire mode of being that rested on humic foundations was being uprooted by forces that swept away the old in order to usher in a paltry newness based on “action[s] without symbol[s],” replacing the old things with things we can no longer “live by” precisely because their connection with the earth has been severed. House, bridge, well, gate, jug, fruit tree, window: these words now evoke the superceded domesticity of a culture that Rilke associates with the earthly-utterable, as opposed to the unearthly-unutterable. What is the nature of this correlation between the earth and the utterable? How does the post-Neolithic exposure of the modern age conspire with or promote the unutterable?

The unutterable lies beyond us. It may be signified, imagined, and even aspired to but not mortally resided in or lived by. Mortals partake of a different destiny than the angels, whose transcendence, if we get too near it, annihilates us. The human finds its place *here*, in the “time of the utterable,” which is the time of transience as such. The historical unfolding of what passes away comes to rest in the earth, its humus. The utterable gives the “lived things” of our human worlds a domestic interior in which to make themselves at home. “Here is the time for the *utterable, here, its home.*” This *here* stands at the entrance of a burrow.

If Aeneas’s commission was to rescue the House of Troy by moving his household gods to a new land, our commission—our “insistent commission,” as Rilke puts it—is to rescue the earth by becoming the agents of its conversion. By the earth Rilke means both more and less than this planetary body orbiting the sun; he means the soil in which all that has come to pass, in its historical modes of being, was rooted and now lies buried. Merely preserving a memory of what vanishes falls short of the task of conversion; so too does environmental and cultural

conservation. In addition to those undertakings, conversion calls for a retrieval of the earth's "human" and "lural" value. In a letter to his Polish publisher, dated November 13, 1925, in which he attempts to explain the deeper import of the *Duino Elegies*, Rilke uses these terms interchangeably:

[F]or our grandparents a "house," a "well," a familiar tower, their very clothes, their coat, were infinitely more intimate; almost everything a vessel in which they found the human and added to the store of the human. Now from America, empty indifferent things are pouring across, sham things, *dummy life*. . . . Live things, things lived and conscient of us, are running out and can no longer be replaced. *We are perhaps the last to have known such things.* On us rests the responsibility not only of preserving *their* memory (that would be little and unreliable), but their human and lural value ("lural" in the sense of the household gods). The earth has no way out other than to become invisible: *in us* who with a part of our natures partake of the invisible, have (at least) stock in it, and can increase our holdings in the invisible during our sojourn here,—*in us* alone can be consummated this intimate and lasting conversion of the visible [earth] into an invisible [earth] no longer dependent upon being visible and tangible, as our own destiny continually *grows at the same time* MORE PRESENT AND INVISIBLE in us. The elegies set up this norm of existence, they celebrate this consciousness. (*Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, p. 375; emphasis in the original)

While the conversion of the earth may sound like an extravagant and quasi-mystical undertaking, human beings are no strangers to the conversion process itself. It is what takes place in mourning. Just as burial lays the dead to rest in the earth, mourning lays them to rest *in us*. The analogy between these two parallel rites of internment rests on an intimate and age-old kinship between the earth and human inwardness—a kinship that makes the earth the caretaker of cultural memory and cultural memory the caretaker of the earth. There is so much of us in the earth, and so much of it in us, that the groundwork for its conversion has already been laid. Just as through burial and mourning we turn the deceased's material absence in the visible world into a "lural" pres-

ence in the invisible world, so too we have the capacity in us to “transmute [the things] in our invisible heart—oh, infinitely into us. Whoever we are.” It is because we are by nature veterans of mourning—veterans of the “elegy,” as it were—that we have it within our power to do for the earth what we have traditionally done for our dead, that is, to transmute its mode of being *in us*. In the broadest sense, a house for Rilke is where such a conversion takes place.

...

Before examining in the next chapter the mechanisms of conversion that take place in the mourning process, we might ask the following question: why are we putting our question—what is a house?—to poets and thinkers rather than to house builders, house dwellers, or house designers? The answer should be clear by now. If nothing else the discussion so far has revealed that to house does not necessarily mean to enclose within walls. It means to open the place of an afterlife. A living space may have walls that keep out the cold but not maintain our vital heat; it may be residential but not laral; it may have a basement for storage but no burrow where time in its stored character is preserved for future retrieval—for retrieval from out of the future. It is because we are probing the depths of this burrow that we turn principally to poets, who from time immemorial have been the ones who have most often sought out its recesses, descended into its underworld, communed with its ghosts, and made themselves at home among its shadows. Hence it is from them that we have the most to learn.

When we speak of the house as the place of an afterlife it need not be the afterlife of the dead *per se* but also of a simple sound, note, or voice. The burrow in question can also be the chamber where such a sound, note, or voice echoes. Let us listen to such an echo in a poem by a contemporary poet, the Italian Valerio Magrelli. Composed in 1992, it is titled “They’re Talking”:

But why always behind my wall?
 Always there, the voices, whenever
 night falls they start
 talking, yelping, even thinking
 it’s better to whisper. (All the while

the cold wind of their words
chills and binds me,
torments me in my sleep).
At the edge of the Arctic circle
A couple cried in its room
Beyond a transparent wall, crying, the wall
A luminous, tender, tympanic membrane.
(And I would vibrate all the while, a soundbox
for their story.) Until at my house
they redid the roof, the pipes,
the façade, everything, pounding
everywhere, upstairs, downstairs, always pounding
chattering between themselves only when I slept
only because I was asleep,
only because I was the soundbox
of their stories.

(*The Contagion of Matter*, p. 43)

Whether the talking couple is real or imaginary, dead or alive, we can't say. That they live at the edge of the Arctic Circle, that they yelp as well as talk, that the wall of their room is a "luminous, tender, tympanic membrane," that they seem to be redoing the poet's house, talking only when he sleeps—all this indicates that they are no ordinary neighbors and that, even though they talk *behind* his wall, they in fact inhabit a more intimate recess of the poet's house. Indeed, the poet becomes the "soundbox" for the couple's stories, which echo in and through the house the way the notes of a stringed instrument resound in its hollow cavity. Whoever the two may be who haunt the poet with their voices during sleep, the fact that their existence comes to us through the poem's sound box is evidence enough that their voices belong to the afterlife. What is a house? To the various answers that have accrued over the course of this chapter, we may add this one as well: a house is a sound box.

In Italian the term used by Magrelli is *cassa armonica*, which almost certainly puns on the Italian word for "house," *casa*. *Cassa* means "chest, safe, coffer, chamber." It is also the word for "coffin"—*cassa di morto*. These linguistic connections are not casual, for they bring together

within a single word (as only poems can do) the house, the dead, and the poet's medium of expression. The *cassa armonica* is the sound box of the Orphic lyre, for it is not only *with* his lyre that Orpheus descends into Hades, it is *in* its resonance chamber that the descent takes place. The poet's voice is itself a *cassa*; it does to words what the sound box does to notes: it restores their power to house. Magrelli confirms as much in a prose piece published in 2001, in which he remarks, regarding this poem, that "the house becomes a musical instrument, or better, the lining of the voice" ("Il ventunesimo compleanno," p. 127). In the same article he declares that it was only after he came upon a passage from *Moby Dick* that he understood to what extent his *cassa armonica* shares an affinity with the coffin, in its containment of the dead. The passage occurs in chapter 127 and features an exchange between Ahab and the ship carpenter, who is turning a coffin into a life buoy to save a sailor adrift on the sea:

"Hark ye, dost thou never sing working about a coffin? The Titans, they say, hummed snatches when chipping out the craters for volcanoes; and the grave-digger in the play sings, spade in hand. Dost thou never?"

"Sing, sir? Do I sing? Oh, I'm indifferent enough, sir, for that; but the reason why the grave-digger made music must have been that there was none in his spade, sir. But the caulking mallet is full of it. Hark to it."

"Aye, and that's because the lid there's a sounding board; and what in all things makes the sounding-board is this—there's naught beneath. And yet a coffin with a body in it rings pretty much the same, Carpenter." (Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 755)

In Cesare Pavese's famous Italian rendition of *Moby Dick*, "sounding board" is translated as *cassa armonica*, and the phrase "there's naught beneath" as "il niente che c'è sotto." [Gia', ed è perchè il coperchio fa da cassa armonica; e ciò che sempre fa da cassa armonica è questo, il niente che c'è sotto.] Taking up the Melville trope in Pavese's translation, Magrelli speaks of poetry as "il niente che suona," the nothing that sounds—making of the house a house of echoes (*Il ventunesimo*, p. 128). But what exactly does it mean for the nothing to sound? What is this "naught" from which words derive their sounding power? In what

sense is the burrow similar to a coffin, a resonance chamber, or a musical sound box? These are questions that take us into the matter of the next chapter. For if poetry has the power to make the naught resound, if it has the power to house, bury, and commune with the dead, it is because its rhythms, accents, and elegiac tones have their elemental source in human grief. If the transmutation of the earth into invisibility is at bottom a poetic task, and if we have the ability to undertake such a task, it is because human beings are veterans of mourning.