The Powers of Fiction and the Conversation with the Dead[1]

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This paper deals with the topic of the conversation with the dead, taken as a shorthand for the practice of literary history. In previous publications, Pieters tried to outline a number of important issues that can be subsumed under this topic, all of them revolving around the idea that literary texts are supreme sources of what is called the historical experience. In this paper, he addresses the question which textual mechanism (if any) procures this specific and special literary-historical experience.

The central question that I would like to address in this paper is the following: if fictional texts are what Aleida Assmann has called 'Erinnerungsräume',[2] spaces (*topoi*) of memory, spaces in which our faculty of memory is addressed, then what about them exactly is it that brings this about? Is it simply a matter of reading conventions (some or other tradition that, in the wake of Homer and Herodotus, does not cease to couple literature to history, treating it as a somehow naturally preferable or supreme source of historical knowledge), or is there something in these texts that, say, structurally appeals to our faculty of memory, that calls it into being in ways that no other texts seem to be able to do, saying to us: 'you there, always remember!', 'always historicize!' In what follows I will defending the second thesis and argue that what singles out fictional texts in this respect, is the fact that they embody (or that they are the supreme occasion of) what I would call 'anachronistic conversations'. As such they bring together two important notions that I would consider central to our

1 This paper was first presented at the conference 'Survivals: the past in the present', convened by Ian Jenkins and Anne McMonagle at the University of Cardiff, Wales, 10-11 September 2005. The author would like to thank Kate Belsey and Neil Badmington for their generous comments upon the original paper. This text, which is part of a larger work in progress on the role of fiction in the contemporary concern with what I would call 'poetic memory', develops a number of ideas from my recent book *Speaking with the dead. Explorations in literature and history*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.

2 Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, München : Beck, 1999.

conception of the poetics of the historical experience: the anachronism (as a moment in time that enables us to side-step time, however momentarily) and the conversation with an absent person, of the sort that we cannot carry on in real life.

'Anachronistic conversations'

Let me begin perhaps with a telling example of such an anachronistic conversation that may already give you an idea of the logic that I am trying to develop here. The example is taken from the new collection of stories by the British writer John Berger, entitled *Here is where we meet*. The stories that make up this wonderful new volume are, in the most literal sense of the word, conversations with the dead. They deal with encounters that the main character (a writer called John) has with dead relatives and deceased friends in several European cities (Lisbon, Krakow, Geneva, Madrid…). The first of these encounters, at the very beginning of the opening story, is introduced as follows: the narrator, John, is sitting on a bench under a Lusitanian cypress on a square in Lisbon. The tree's branches, 'a gigantic, impenetrable, very low umbrella with a diameter of twenty metres' seem to cover the entire square. Opposite John, at the other end of the square, sits an old woman:

> It was hot – perhaps 28° C – at the end of the month of May. In a week or two, Africa, which begins – in a manner of speaking – on the far bank of the Tagus, would begin to impose a distant yet tangible presence. An old woman with an umbrella was sitting very still on one of the park benches. She had the kind of stillness that draws attention to itself. Sitting there on the park bench, she was determined to be noticed. A man with a suitcase walked through the square with the air of going to a rendezvous he kept every day. Afterwards a woman carrying a little dog in her arms – both of them looking sad – passed, heading down towards the Avenida de Liberdade. The old woman on the bench persisted in her demonstrative stillness. To whom was it addressed?
>
> Abruptly, as I was asking myself this question, she got to her feet, turned and, using her umbrella like a walking stick, came towards me.

> I recognised her walk, long before I could see her face. The walk of somebody already looking forward to arriving and sitting down. It was my mother.[3]

As we embark upon a story, Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Ronald Shusterman write in their appropriately conversational introduction to what they call 'the literary experience' – the book's title is *L'emprise des signes. Débat sur l'expérience littéraire* (2002) – we enter a new world, the world of fiction, which like that of the past can be seen as a foreign country. In the world of fiction, they do things differently. The world of fiction, Lecercle and Shusterman argue, should be defined in terms of an encyclopaedic anomaly, rather than a linguistic one.[4] It is not that the language used in this world differs from that used in our non-fictional universe (Berger's everyday prose, his non-spectacular realism one might even say, perfectly bears witness to this), the difference resides elsewhere. In this case, the difference resides in the simple fact (a fact presented by Berger as something as straightforward as drinking a glass of water, or folding an old newspaper) that the dead roam about the streets and talk to us, not in the overly theatricalized style of one or other zombie movie, but casually, as if to counter Heiner Müller's dictum that the dead are only dead in the present.[5] The story's protagonist walks the streets of Lisbon, as he carries a long conversation with his dead mother, not only about their joint past but also about the plans that she still has for the future. Obviously, this type of conversation is only possible in the world of fiction: that seems to be the suggestion of the title of Berger's collection: *Here is where we meet* – 'here', in the universe of the story, in the anachronistic moment that offers itself to us when the chronological borderline that separates the living from the dead, and reduces the dead to eternal silence, is lifted.

3 John Berger, *Here is where we meet*, London: Bloomsbury, 2005, p. 2.

4 Jean-Jacques Lecercle & Ronald Shusterman, *L'emprise des signes. Débat sur l'expérience*, Paris: Seuil, 2002, p. 10.

5 "Das Tote ist nicht Tot in der Geschichte. Eine Funktion von Drama ist Totenbeschwörung – der Dialog mit den Toten darf nicht abreissen, bis sie herausgeben, was an Zukunft mit ihnen begraben ist." Müller quoted in Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, pp. 175-176.

Metalepsis

The point that I would like to make here is not simply that Berger's dead mother can only be made to speak in fiction, but also (and maybe even more importantly) that the author can only address her as a fictional character himself. The fact that the narrator of the stories is called John, like the author who created him, is relatively incidental. What matters in my view is that in order to meet this still speaking dead mother, in order to reach out to her and address her, Berger needed to find for himself a position and a voice that allowed him to literally break through and move beyond the awful silence of the present in which his mother no longer speaks. (It is not only a moment of anachronism but also of exorcism, to borrow Müller's image.) This position, and the voice that accompanies it, I would argue, is opened up by the phenomenon that Lecercle and Shusterman consider essential to fiction and to our experience of it: metalepsis, the founding trope of fiction in their view, that allows authors to create a distance between their own voice and that of the text in which they try to give voice to ideas and thoughts and experiences that would have an altogether different effect if they came straight from the author's mouth. In the tropological mechanism of metalepsis, Lecercle and Shusterman write, "un texte unique se fait porteur de deux voix"[6]: one single text carries two voices, and at the same time it is carried by these two voices. In other words, the text is marked by the distance between two voices, that of the author and that of the implied author one could perhaps say. What Berger does in his story, in a way that again is so casual that one hardly notices it, is to make room within this single double voice for a third one, that of the already dead but still speaking mother.

The conversation between the narrator and his dead mother is not marked by quotation signs: the enunciations of the characters are not instances of reported speech. To an extent, this can be taken as a signal of the fact that the conversation goes on in the head of the narrator; but then again, the effect of Berger's story is that it does not: this is a true conversation between two characters and the reader actually experiences it as such. I will come back to this textual mechanism later, with reference to a second example of this metaleptic structure, but let me first move on to a next level of my

6 Lecercle & Shusterman, *L'emprise des signes*, p. 34.

argument about the relationship between the ideology of poetic knowledge and the working (*Wirkung*) of fictional texts.

Sebald and the ideology of poetic memory

One of the more recent expressions of the ideology of poetic knowledge that I came across is the following passage from the collection *Another Beauty* (2000) by the Polish poet and essay writer Adam Zagajewski :

> I'm not a historian, but I'd like literature to assume, consciously and in all seriousness, the function of a historical chronicle. I don't want it to follow the example set by modern historians, cold fish by and large, who spend their lives in vanquished archives and write in an inhuman, ugly, wooden, bureaucratic language from which all poetry's been driven, a language flat as a wood louse and petty as the daily paper. I'd like it to return to earlier examples, maybe even Greek, to the ideal of the historian-poet, a person who either has seen and experienced what he describes for himself, or has drawn upon a living oral tradition, his family's or his tribe's, who doesn't fear engagement and emotion, but who cares nonetheless about his story's truthfulness.[7]

As Zagajewski puts it, "we are in fact witnessing a revival of the literature that serves this very purpose" of poetic memory[8] – he refers to the writings of, among others, Edwin Muir, Czeslaw Milosz, Joseph Brodsky, Nicola Chiaromonte. One author I would immediately add to this list is the Anglo-German W.G. 'Max' Sebald, who tragically died in a car accident in December 2001 and who, for the past few years, has become one of the most internationally celebrated writers of his time. I would like to move over, briefly, to his work because, like the stories by Berger, it has determined the course of my argument to a considerable extent. Sebald is much less casual about the conversation with the dead than John Berger, for whom the possibility (at least in fiction) is something of a self-evidence. Sebald's relationship with the past is a much more melancholy one than Berger's, much more driven by grief for loss, very close to Walter Benjamin's view on the writing of history as a

7 Adam Zagajewski, *Another Beauty*, University of Georgia Press, 2002, p. 21.
8 Adam Zagajewski, *Another Beauty*, p. 21.

form of salvation, and of a recovery. "He was like someone who suffers remorse for crimes he never committed", Charles Simic wrote in a recent piece on Sebald in *The New York Review of Books*, and I think that pretty much sums it up.[9] In his latest book, the posthumously published collection *Campo Santo*, Sebald offers the following moving reflection on the preservation of the dead:

> They are still around us, the dead, but there are times when I think that perhaps they will soon be gone. Now that we have reached a point where the number of those alive on earth has doubled within just three decades, and will treble within the next generation, we need no longer fear the once overwhelming numbers of the dead. Their significance is visibly decreasing. We can no longer speak of everlasting memory and the veneration of our forebears. On the contrary: the dead must now be cleared out of the way as quickly and comprehensively as possible. What mourner at a crematorium funeral has not thought, as the coffin moves into the furnace, that the way we now take leave of the dead is marked by ill-concealed and paltry haste? And the room allotted to them becomes smaller and smaller; they are often given notice to leave after only a few years. Where will their mortal remains go then, how will they be disposed of? It is a fact that there is great pressure on space, even here in the country. What must it be like in the cities inexorably moving towards the thirty million mark? Where will they all go, the dead of Buenos Aires and São Paulo, of Mexico City, Lagos and Cairo, Tokyo, Shanghai and Bombay? Very few of them, probably, into a cool grave. And who has remembered them, who remembers them at all?[10]

The implied answer to the final, rhetorical question is clear: it is the writer, the poet, whose task it is to continuously remind us of the living presence of the dead. In the closing pages of *Campo Santo*, Sebald states his intent very clearly. "*A quoi bon la littérature*?", he wonders. "Perhaps only to remember, and teach us to understand that some strange connections cannot be explained by causal logic".[11] And he goes on to write: "There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and

9 Charles Simic, "The Solitary Notetaker", *The New York Review of Books*, August 11, 2005, pp. 30-32.
10 W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005, pp. 34-35.
11 W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, pp. 213-4.

above the mere recital of facts and over and above scholarship."[12] Again, this is an apt synthesis of what I have earlier called the ideology of poetic memory, in which literature is promoted to a rank superior to 'mere' history, the 'scholarship' of the 'recital of facts'.

Rather than follow up with a survey of Sebald's work, I would like to focus upon one of the techniques that he uses in order to obtain this restitution (the moment in which a poetic conception of history seems to pay off) in *The Rings of Saturn* (originally published in 1995, English translation 1998). The book, like most of Sebald's work, recounts a journey made by the author-narrator and has a distinctly autobiographical ring (while in the case of Berger's stories one still has the occasional reminder that the author and the narrator are structurally different, in the case of Sebald this idea nearly never enters the reader's mind.) Sebald's book relates a number of encounters the narrator has or had with strangers and friends. Some of these are real, live encounters, while others are merely mental ones, in the sense that the narrator comes across traces of people dead and gone with whom he feels an immediate sympathy and in whose life he finds a number of means of connection, correspondence and conversation. The idea of correspondence is an important notion in Sebald's work: as he puts it in the closing pages of *Campo Santo*, it serves as the foundation of his poetic procedure, which he describes as a continued effort "in adhering to a historical perspective, in patiently engraving and linking together apparently disparate things in the manner of a still life".[13] In the same essay, he puts it as follows:

> I have kept asking myself since then what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run. What, for instance, links my visit to the Reinsburgstrasse with the fact that in the years immediately after the war it contained a camp for so-called displaced persons, a place which was raided on 20 March 1946 by about a hundred and eighty Stuttgart police officers, in the course of which, although the raid discovered nothing but a black market trade in a few hen's eggs, several shots were fired and one of the camp inmates, who had only just been reunited with this wife and two children, most his life?
> Why can I not get such episodes out of my mind?[14]

12 W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 215.
13 W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 210.
14 W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, p. 210.

Within the conceptual framework of the ideology of poetic memory, the most logical answer to this second rhetorical question is a very simple and straightforward one: Sebald cannot get the characters and the voices that are inside his head out of his mind, because they are quite literally inside his head, inside him, as remnants of a past that he has been chosen to recount, as lost souls who have set up house in him after they have died. The key to the answer is the idea of metempsychosis, the ancient belief in the transmigration of the souls, a central notion in the reflection on the conversation with the dead. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* contains a number of references to the idea, but, more importantly, there are several passages in the book in which he uses a technique, not entirely unrelated to that of Berger, to show its effects and its working. It is hard to give a brief example of this, since the effects of the technique become only clear in longer stretches of prose, but the gist of it is quite simple. In the course of the passages that I am thinking of, Sebald recounts a conversation that he once had with friends or some or other stranger that he met. Whether or not the conversation is imagined is of course impossible to say, but it is presented as if it once took place and the reader has no reason to doubt this. At first, the reports what he himself and the other party were saying at the time ("I said", "he said"), but gradually, and inadvertently, these conversational markers begin to disappear. As a result of this, it is no longer clear to the reader who is actually saying what. References to an 'I' become very ambiguous. The effect of this is more striking than a simple description of the technique can convey: it is as if the two lives and the two voices literally intertwine and begin to fuse.[15]

In a manner of speaking: Gadamer on dialogue

The idea of the literary text's larger historical appeal, I would like to suggest in what follows, concerns the question of the textual voice that addresses the reader and that functions, obviously, as one of the grounding conditions for the conversation with the dead. While the dead cannot literally speak, they make themselves heard in the textual

15 As I said, one would need a close analysis of a longer stretch of Sebald's text to illustrate this. A good example, I think, is the passage in *The Rings of Saturn*, where the narrator recounts a conversation that he has with the poet and writer Michael Hamburger, one of Sebald's translators. W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, London: Vintage, 2002, pp. 181 ff.

traces they have left behind – in letters written with one or more specific readers in mind; alternatively, in notes and in diaries whose sole intended reader is the author himself; or in speeches that directly address a larger audience. In all of these texts, the dead speak to us by means of traces that are the direct product of the very voice that first gave them shape. But the dead also speak to us in fiction, which owes its existence (and its reception) to a 'contract' that says that the voice that we hear in these texts is distinctly not that of the person who wrote the text – not of that person alone, at least. In a literary text, so we assume, the author does not talk to us directly nor in his own name. The voice that we hear in literary texts is not a voice that precedes the text; it doesn't even exist apart from it. Rather, it is an effect of the words that give shape to the text and to the voice that addresses us in the shape of these words. The voice that resounds from literary texts is part of the imaginative reality that is constructed in the text. Literary, fictional texts are not, by definition, messages from their authors: the author does not speak in his novels, his poems or his plays, at least he does not do so in his own name. The voices that we hear in novels, poems and plays do not, in any way, exist prior to the text's production.

Some critics, like Wayne C. Booth, have identified these voices as that of the implied author, while others have related it to what Wolfgang Iser termed the implied reader. Both terms stand not for live people but for a textual phenomenon, possibly even for the same textual phenomenon, even though Booth and Iser would probably disagree with this. What interests me here is not so much the discussion of whether the text's potential is a 'writerly' function (as Booth suggests) or a 'readerly' one (as Iser claims) , but what their concepts have in common: the adjective 'implied', which I would like to relate for now to the Grecian idea of the 'conversational implicature', the idea that a conversation works on the basis of a certain set of principles of co-operation and hinges on the double-bind between things said and things implied. The idea of applying Grecian conversational analysis to the reading of literary texts is not new (Mary-Louise Pratt, for instance, and Susan Sniader Lanser have written about this), and only recently Lecercle and Shusterman have argued that "literary texts are the privileged locus where the rules of conversation are 'mises en scène'.[16] But the problem that interests me here is the relationship that can be forged between this application

16 Lecercle & Shusterman, *L'emprise des signes*, p. 44.

and the analysis of the historical experience. Put in more concrete terms, what type of conversation are we talking about when we conceive of the reading of historical texts as a conversation with the dead?

One immediate and highly intuitive response to this question would be that the dialogue with the dead is strictly speaking no dialogue at all. As Stephen Greenblatt puts it in his analysis of the topos, not only is one participant structurally absent from the conversation, it is also a fact that the other party does all the talking. What we hear when we hear the dead, Greenblatt writes, is basically our own voice, in which as he puts it "the dead [have] contrived to leave textual traces of themselves".[17] Even though he is careful not to turn the conversation with the dead into a simple monologue, I believe that Greenblatt continues to overstate the importance of his own voice in the imaginary dialogue that we are talking about. The dialogue with the dead is not a dialogue that is carried on by the living, who simply ventriloquize (or appropriate) what others have said before them. It is an altogether different experience, I am starting to think, after having read the paragraph from Hans-Georg Gadamer's classic analysis of the historical experience in *Truth and Method*. Gadamer is talking here about what he calls 'das wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein', which is somewhat hard to translate in English. The term refers to our consciousness as beings with a historical awareness who allow history to work upon them, but also to the history of reception of certain texts and ideas: for instance, what is the history of the reception of the work of Saint Augustine, if we compare the early comments upon his work with those by Petrarch. As Gaddamer stresses, the text's *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the succession of interpretations that it has generated, is part of its meaning. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer has thoroughly questioned the conception of the act of reading as a dialogue. If we want to understand the workings of our "Wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein", Gadamer writes, we must start from the fact that a text does not talk to us in the same way as a living person does. However, Gadamer makes this point, not in order to simply get rid of the idea of reading as a dialogue, but in order to show that the image is more complex than it seems, and appropriately so. It is important to stress that the dialogue of reading as Gadamer conceives of it is wholly

17 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 1.

different from the reading session in terms of an interview between a reader who questions a text and the text itself (or its author) who gives an answer to the reader's questions. Gadamer's analysis makes clear that the roles in a conversation are not distributed according to a simple symmetrical logic. It is not as if we ask questions while the text (the dead author) provides us with answers. As Gadamer makes clear, the reverse is the case and at the same time: the text that we read presents itself to us as a question (as a series of questions even) to which we as readers have to respond. While this response can be conceived as an answer to the question put to us by the text, at the same time it provokes questions to which the text can help us find an answer, not without, however, shifting the original question with which we approached the text as we hoped to find an answer to our problems.

We say that we 'conduct' a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an even that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was ill fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it – i.e., that it allows something to 'merge' which henceforth exists.[18]

One does not carry a conversation, Gadamer suggests, one is carried along through it – it is an 'Erfahrung' in which one is almost literally transported on the waves of language, and the same thing happens to the other party, with whom we are having a conversation, or rather with whom we find ourselves together in a conversation – we are drawn into a conversation Gadamer writes (*geraten*), we are involved in it and even get caught up in it (*verwickeln*) in the sense that we get lost in it. Again, the English idiom seems to be inadequate to convey Gadamer's point : it is the conversation that does all the talking for us, that is in charge of how things develop. What comes

18 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans.Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London/New York: Continuum, 1989, p. 385.

out of this conversation, he writes further, none of the parties know; the conversation has its own energetic drive, its "Geist". The central thesis of Gadamer's analysis of the historical experience and of the fusion of horizons that it involves is that both result from language itself : it is what he calls in the German original "die Leistung der Sprache".[19]

What, then, is the contribution of fiction in this restitutional practice of poetical memory? Fiction stages a conversation, I would say in an attempt to round off my argument, not so much (or not only) between an author and a reader, but also between the implied author and the implied reader of the text. They are the ones who actually meet in the anachronistic moment of the act of reading. They are, in the literal sense of the word, a contribution of language (*Leistung der Sprache*) in that they are at the same time textual constructions and voices that we allow to resonate in the conversation that we embark upon as we begin to read a literary text.

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19 Interestingly, the German word "Leistung", contribution, also in the financial meaning of the word, reminds us of Sebald's ideal of the writing of literature as a restitution to the past.

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