Afterword: Speaking with the Dead

LINDA WOODBRIDGE

VARIOUS GHOSTS HAVE HAUNTED THIS SPECIAL TOPIC. Caroline Weber's essay conjures the ghosts of slaves in Denis Diderot's *Le fils naturel*. Kari Lokke explores the way Germaine de Staël, Mary Shelley, and George Sand deploy tales of contact with the spirits of the dead to probe a nation's political unconscious, enlisting the dead to galvanize the present into revolutionary action. For Todd Samuel Presner, Hegel's grand sweep of world history is haunted by the ghosts of Jews written out of that history. That *PMLA* in its special topics has not always wanted to listen to the Spirit of Literature Past is unsurprising, for the desire to listen to history's ghosts is by no means universal.

Stephen Greenblatt may have begun "with the desire to speak with the dead,"[1] but over the years, many have begun with the desire *not* to. The Reformation, for example, worked to sever lines of communication with the dead, particularly in the form of prayers for their souls. The dead had once been part of the community, their memories kept fresh by gravestones and remembrance in prayer. In popular belief, the dead haunted the living as ghosts or watched them like an audience, as Shakespeare shows: "the spirits of the wise sit in the clouds and mock us" (*Henry IV, Part 2* 2.2.135); "when I am in heaven," Henry VIII says of baby Elizabeth, "I shall desire / To see what this child does" (*Henry VIII* 5.4.68–69); asked "what wert thou, if the King of Naples heard thee?" Ferdinand replies, "He does hear me" (*Tempest* 1.2.434–36)—death having sharpened the king's sensory perception, the father can now hear his son at any time. One hardly needed history when the ancestors lived in the community. But the Reformation labored to oust ancestral ghosts.

A favorite target was belief in purgatory, which reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Tyndale) assailed on economic grounds: praying for souls in

LINDA WOODBRIDGE is Distinguished Professor of English at the Pennsylvania State University. Her most recent book is *Vagrancy, Homelessness, and English Renaissance Literature* (U of Illinois P, 2001). She has coedited the collection *Women, Violence, and English Renaissance Literature: Essays Honoring Paul Jorgensen* (Arizona State UP) and edited the collection *Money and the Age of Shakespeare: Essays in New Economic Criticism* (Palgrave), both forthcoming in 2003.

© 2003 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X47868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

purgatory, they maintained, was a pretext for financial exactions supporting monastic foundations such as chantries. In a tract that virtually sparked the English Reformation, Simon Fish put antipurgatory arguments in the mouths of the "deserving poor": "to gather these yearly exactions, . . . they [the Catholic clergy] say they pray for us to God, to deliver our souls out of the pains of purgatory; without whose prayer, they say, or at least without the pope's pardon, we could never be delivered thence." But, Fish proclaims, "there is no purgatory: . . . it is a thing invented by the covetousness of [churchmen]. . . . If that the pope with his pardons for money may deliver one soul thence, he may deliver him as well without money; if he may deliver one, he may deliver a thousand; if he may deliver a thousand, he may deliver them all, and so destroy purgatory" (11).

Pronouncing purgatory a fiction was a thrilling rupture with the past, like that "[c]reativity" Christopher Lane discusses which "ruptures connections between our culture and its traditions." But it was a paradoxically destructive creativity. Eamon Duffy writes of the "profound if not always conscious effect" of cutting this line of communication with a community's past:

> The removal of the images of the saints, of the altars, and perhaps most of all the brasses and obit inscriptions calling for prayers for the dead, which were ripped up from gravestones and sold by the hundredweight from 1548 onwards, were ritual acts of deep significance. . . . The removal of the images and petitions of the dead was an act of oblivion, a casting out of the dead from the community of the living. (494)

Insofar as history is the recovered or imagined record of dead ancestors, the Reformation's desire not to speak with the dead was a profoundly antihistorical moment in history, and Renaissance historiography felt its impact. It is poignant to imagine John Stow, that great historian of London, prowling the parishes of the city in the 1580s and '90s in search of its vanished citizenry, only to be met in church after church with illegible funerary monuments, effaced by reforming zeal.

At that moment in history, reformers were not alone in cold-shouldering the dead: the rise of nation-states also worked against respect for the immediate past. Of the rhetorical strategies of the architects of European nationhood, Richard Helgerson, in *Forms of Nationhood*, writes:

> Self-definition comes from the not-self, from the alien other. But in the discourses of nationhood, . . . to constitute itself as a nation-state, a political or cultural community must distinguish itself not only from its neighbors but also from its former self. . . . Prompted by the cultural breaks of Renaissance and Reformation, sixteenth-century national self-articulation began with a sense of national barbarism, with a recognition of the self as the despised other, and then moved to repair that damaged self-image. (22)

At the forefront of burgeoning European nationalism, Renaissance England witnessed an explosion of historical writing about the home country: a blizzard of chronicles and histories; political biographies; Shakespeare's ten history plays (plus two tragedies with plots drawn from Holinshed's *Chronicles*); English history plays by Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Heywood, and others; long historical poems such as Samuel Daniel's sweeping poetic chronicle on England's late medieval civil wars. The sheer volume of historical publication is the more impressive given that English history was not taught in schools or universities (which dealt only in Greek and Roman history): English history books catered solely to readers' private edification.

Much of this historical writing, as if in the service of nascent nationalism, assailed medieval ancestors. A crucial account of the founding of a glorious nation-state, Edward Hall's *Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Families of Lancaster and York*, represented the Tudors as having established a stable national government by ending destructive medieval civil wars. This strategic disowning of the medieval past influ-

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X47868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enced a century of historical writing, including Shakespeare's history plays, with their jaundiced view of late medieval politics. If the dead make up the original imagined community, to adapt Benedict Anderson's famous phrase, Renaissance Europe founded a living imagined community, the nation, on the desecrated graves of a dead medieval community.

But some of the dead were considered worth talking to. If the Renaissance refused converse with the medieval dead, it reopened channels of communication with the more distant dead of classical antiquity, as a child rebelling against a parent sometimes grows close to a grandparent. As A. Bartlett Giamatti shows, the Renaissance regarded its project of recovering the classics as the resurrection of a dead body: the now unfashionable nineteenth-century term *Renaissance*, though unknown in the sixteenth century, is not false to the humanists' view of themselves as magical physicians, neo-Aesculapians who could raise to life the bodies of the ancients. As Renaissance Europe saw itself rising from the ruins of the Middle Ages, so the Middle Ages, rather more dejectedly, had imagined itself camping on the ruins of Rome. Two foundational documents of the Middle Ages, Boethius's *Consolations of Philosophy* and Augustine's *City of God*, derive their prototypical medieval *contemptus mundi* from contemplating the recent sack of Rome. But Renaissance recovery operations cut the ground from under the medieval *sic transit gloria mundi*: Rome had not really fallen after all. With the help of Renaissance physicians, dead texts could speak again.

Donald Hedrick's essay in this issue cites Jacques Derrida's vision in *Specters of Marx* of a "counterintuitive historiography" by which even "the dead must be able to work," and indeed it was the church's enlistment of the purgatorial dead to shore up its vast economic establishment that prompted the Reformation to turn on the ancestors. Although putting even the dead to work smacks of a Protestant work ethic, Catholic apologists could play this game too, representing the Middle Ages as chaotic because of the germinal proto-Protestant heresies it harbored. George Cavendish put an ideologically committed deathbed speech in the mouth of Cardinal Wolsey, who asks that Henry VIII be advised "in God's name, that he have a vigilant eye to depress this new perverse sect of the Lutherans," spiritual descendants of dangerous medieval Wycliffites: "In the history of King Richard the Second, . . . in that same time of Wycliffe's seditious opinions did not the commons . . . rise against the King and nobles of the realm of England?" (184–85). And secular historiographers put the dead to work too, justifying autocratic regimes by dwelling on the chaos of civil war that preceded them.

The dead made especially productive workers if one put one's own words in their mouths. Congenial models were to hand: classical historians such as Plutarch had fabricated speeches of historical figures. A slavish adherence to what was actually said was foreign to classical historiography: chroniclers wrote what might have been said, should have been said. To many Renaissance writers, history could serve rhetoric, offering exempla for use in polemic, or rhetoric could serve history, embellishing it with imagined orations or dialogue. Most Renaissance historical writers saw no problem in reporting private conversations that no historian could have overheard. Cavendish invented Wolsey's long prison dialogue. Thomas More, in a biography of Richard III (written about 1513), presents as dialogue King Edward's dressing-down by his mother for wanting to marry a commoner, along with Edward's saucy ripostes; More also reports what Richard whispered to the Lord Mayor up on a dais (82–84, 96).

Such eruptions of imagination, in place of authenticated historical documents, are anathema to modern "scientific," empiricist historiographers. With their scholarly and curricular bias toward all things modern, later historians tend to praise earlier historical writing when they detect in it the infancy of empiricist historiography. It is true that Renaissance writers, partly through

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X47868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the influence of natural philosophers (scientists), deployed a rhetoric valuing documentary evidence and eyewitness testimony. An older generation of chroniclers had cheerfully slanted history to support the regime in power: the first edition of Hardyng's chronicles, written during Henry VI's reign, supported the Lancastrian side in the Wars of the Roses; the second, written with a Yorkist in power, excised a eulogy to Henry VI and inserted passages skeptical of the Lancastrian claim to the throne (Gransden 277–78). But with Polydore Vergil, naked political self-interest began to be effaced by a stated allegiance to historical fact: though his patron, Henry VII, had claimed descent from King Arthur to buttress a shaky claim to the throne, Vergil boldly questioned Arthur's historicity. Modern historians find in skeptical scholars such as Lorenzo Valla, Francesco Guicciardini, and William Camden a protomodern allegiance to archival research and eyewitness testimony. But disconcertingly, a similar-sounding though entirely bogus rhetoric of empiricism can be found in sixteenth-century "rogue literature." Claiming to have witnessed crimes and interviewed criminals, writers such as Thomas Harman and Robert Greene turned venerable anecdotes from popular culture into "history," through a posture of investigative reporting. The resulting category confusion has befuddled posterity: well into recent times, historians have mined Harman's work for historical "facts."[2] That a rhetoric of direct-observation crime reportage seems historically to have preceded any real investigative reporting fosters suspicion that for historiographers, as for writers of rogue literature, the posture of objective truth seeker was to some degree a rhetorical device, an enabling fiction. But before modernists dismiss early modern history as nonempirical, they might contemplate the claims to objective facticity of modern historiographers: Keith Thomas has recently observed that modern historians who portray "the Reformation as a state imposition upon a reluctant people have tended to be Catholics" (Aidan Gasquet, J. J. Scarisbrick, Eamon Duffy), while "those who have emphasized the spontaneous growth of Lollardy and Lutheranism have, unsurprisingly, tended to be Protestants" (E. G. Rupp, A. G. Dickens, Diarmaid MacCulloch [Thomas 56]).

As David Kastan notes, later historians given to "whiggish narratives of historiographic sophistication and objectivity" have cherished the Renaissance historian John Stow, who lays claim to objectivity, while they brush away Stow's competitor Richard Grafton, whose history exudes Protestant bias. Though "later historians have taken [Stow] at his word" as an objective truth seeker, he was actually "no less tendentious than . . . his rival" (75): Stow's Catholic sympathies, which he prudently kept quiet in Protestant London, color his reporting of political and religious upheavals. That poignant image of Stow prowling London parishes in search of historical evidence and meeting only defaced monuments reflects his self-presentation as a disinterested truth seeker, but monuments defaced during the Reformation were hardly neutral objects to a historian of Catholic leanings.

The Protestant disinclination to speak with the dead, a synecdoche for the various ways the Reformation and Renaissance established identity by disowning the Middle Ages, involved an othering process that paradoxically allowed the rejected past the dignity of its separateness and strangeness, in a way that the silent assimilations of modernist prejudice do not. Where a "presentist" cast of mind involves, as Tilottama Rajan notes in her introduction to this issue, "a loss of history as a site of something different from the present," the Reformation retained a lively sense of history as a site of something different: history was a conversion narrative in which benighted Catholicism had been gloriously thrown off. But despite such narratives, the past lived on, in a Catholicism that refused to die, reasserting itself across Europe in various manifestations of the Counter-Reformation. In many officially Protestant lands, Catholicism retained the dignified status of feared enemy in-

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X47868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

stead of being viewed as a primitive prologue to the present. The immediacy of the contest between Catholic and Protestant appears in Miles Philips's narrative of selfhood forged through Protestant resistance to Catholic conversion, discussed by Richard Helgerson in this issue.

What was distinctive in Renaissance historical writing was not embryonic empiricism but polyvocality: a gradually dawning willingness, painfully forged in the furnaces of sixteenth-century religious hatred and warfare, to listen to the dead on both sides. The sixteenth-century historian Thomas Cooper, looking back over decades of religious carnage, described his handling of episodes of religious factionalism: "I do without reproachful words of either party rehearse the thing as it was done, adding thereto no odious judgment of mine own, but leaving indifferent to the reader to judge of things as he shall think good" (A3–A3v). Thoughtful writers must have seen how difficult evenhandedness was for any single observer: perhaps the enduring historiographical contribution of the age is that it addressed this difficulty by multiplying the observers, even if they had to be imagined. Its great historiographical achievement, Holinshed's *Chronicles*, a collaboration of many editors, incorporated the voices of earlier historians and offered diverging viewpoints on a wide range of events. Recording the high-profile Throckmorton treason trial, the *Chronicles* fully represented the arguments of both prosecution and defense. Annabel Patterson documents the *Chronicles*' commitment to an ideal of "indifferency": the word "'indifferently,' which has almost disappeared from our own vocabulary by its fatal attraction to apathy, recurs in the *Chronicles*," indicating a respect for diversity born of the bitter experience of sixteenth-century religious intolerance and violence, "the pragmatic realization that irremediable diversity of opinion in all the most important matters had become a fact of early modern life" (ix, xii).[3] Such willingness to listen to both sides, far from being a trait of cultural immaturity, is an achievement that (supposedly advanced) modern historical writing has but fleetingly equaled.

Reflecting—and fostering—this cultural commitment to many voices, the Renaissance educational system was intensely dialogic: students who regularly composed orations on both sides of a set question were unlikely to regard any position as inherently indefensible. Attending to divergent viewpoints was a cultivated intellectual skill, a condition of possibility for the heteroglossia that is a hallmark of Renaissance drama. In this issue, Christopher Lane discusses the case for fiction's "testimonial superiority to history," and such a case could be made for drama: if no single voice can be credited with "indifferency," a polyvocal genre like the Shakespearean history play offers a closer approach to historical truth than the voice of any single historiographer. Yes, *Henry V* takes liberties with historical facts such as the kill count at Agincourt. But against this may be set the presence in the play of a divergent voice from a class to which archival historiography permits no access: the foot soldier Williams, who challenges Henry's assumption that his "cause [is] just and his quarrel honourable" with five small but thrilling words of dissent: "That's more than we know" (4.1.132–34). As if recognizing drama's generic commitment to divergent points of view, Holinshed's *Chronicles*, in presenting the Throckmorton trial, slips into "what we now recognize as dramatic form, complete with speech prefixes and occasional stage directions" (Patterson 154). Here again, words are put into the mouths of the dead, but there is a difference: the aim is not to support a single ideological position but to create multiple viewpoints, to give a voice, however imaginary, to the divergent interests of the age.

Would silence be better? Should the search for historical truth be limited to what was demonstrably said? Can history give access to truth by limiting reported speech to verbatim accounts unearthed from archives? Leaving aside the epistemological quagmire of transcribed archival documents themselves, silence in the face

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X47868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of missing evidence is no guarantee of objectivity. That allowing only attested documents to speak is hardly ideologically innocent appears in the selectivity of what gets left out: those with no document-making power—foot soldiers, women—will have no voice in history. The case for fiction's "testimonial superiority to history" may come down to whether an imagined voice is better than no voice. In considering the ethics of ventriloquism, one might distinguish between putting words in dead mouths in support of a single ideological agenda and giving imagined voice to conflicting views or conflicting social interests. The former gives voice to one side only; the latter allows for dissenting voices, including those usually left out of archives. In one sense, the spectral voice of the soldier Williams is a historical cheat, a voice without an archive. In another sense, this attempt at historical even-handedness, at restoration of balance, is a crucially active imagining of history.

This special topic began in the dissatisfaction of two members of the *PMLA* Editorial Board with an increasingly prevalent way of imagining history that encodes the modern as a priori more sophisticated and worthier of attention than the early. Among the disciplinary consequences of such encoding, as Rajan and I have noted, is (first) that the Renaissance, in becoming "early modern," is not only subsumed into the discipline of history (where the term *early modern* originated) but also enters a discourse in which "early," devalued as an unsophisticated formative stage, plays a kind of child to the adult called "modern." And a complementary consequence, as Rajan has shown, is a redrawing of disciplinary boundaries that causes Romanticism to disappear. This redrawing looks like an assault on a movement philosophically committed to valorizing earliness—the idea of pure poetry existing in an earlier state of humanity, the imagination that is vivid in childhood and fades with adulthood, the preference for the earliest versions of a poet's work. The literature thus suppressed proposes an alternative to the intellectual model that holds "later" more sophisticated than "earlier"; this literature also champions the imagination against the dead hand of pure empiricism.

In our departments, earlier literatures are steadily losing curricular ground, obliterated not by an othering like the Protestant disowning of the Catholic medieval past but by a more insidious process: patronized, earlier writers are assimilated as "just like moderns" but less developed, embryonic. At a moment when scholars of earlier literature (not unlike Renaissance archaeologists of ancient texts) are recovering the lost voices of early women writers, working-class writers, and writers of color, courses in which these resurrected authors might be taught are vanishing from the curriculum. One token early writer, Shakespeare, stays in the curriculum by virtue of the bizarre but doggedly held doctrine that he is magically timeless, "really" a modern—a sad loss of literary history as a site of something different from the present. Thus, by imperceptible degrees, our curriculum committees, course schedulers, and hiring committees cast out the dead from the community of the living.

To value the nonmodern on its own terms, not merely as a precursor of modernity, is to challenge the notion that chronological earliness in literature should be devalued in comparison with modernity. It may well be that earlier historical writers possessed a praxis of dialogic imagination that puts to shame many writers chronologically more modern; but even those who do not acknowledge its superior excellence should respect its difference. Just as "the presence of several generations in a department results, at its best, in a palimpsest of understandings" (as Rajan says in her introduction), so the presence in our curricula of earlier literatures—understood as different from modern literature rather than as the same but less developed—provides a diversity as valuable to our intellectual life as racial or gender diversity.

Shall we, then, rethink our commitment to a fashion system that values the recent for the

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X47868 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sake of its recentness? Before we slice our fingers on the cutting edge, let us rekindle our desire to speak with the dead, lest the spirits of the wise sit in the clouds and mock us.

Notes

[1] See the celebrated opening sentence of Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*.

[2] J. S. Cockburn (in 1977) used Harman's *Caveat* alongside records of court assizes as a valid source of historical information on vagrants. David Palliser (in 1983) adduced Harman's information about rogues when attempting to gauge the number of vagrants on the roads in the sixteenth century. In 1988 the sole source Roger Manning gave for the information that "there did exist a small hard core of 'sturdy beggars' and 'lusty rogues' whom no law could compel to do honest labour" was Harman's *Caveat* (160). A *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer in 1995 gave high marks to a medical history of syphilis for finding information in Harman on the sixteenth-century criminal "subculture" (Flood). Often one must excavate fine print in footnotes to find that the source of "information" is Harman.

[3] As Patterson shows, even the ardently partisan Protestant historian John Bale was capable of a momentary vision of nonpartisan history, unswayed by "affections" (passions) in any particular ideological direction: "I would wish some learned Englishman . . . to set forth the English chronicles in their right shape, . . . all affections set apart" (A5v).

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict R. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 1983. Rev. ed. New York: Verso, 1991.

Bale, John. *A Brief Chronicle concerning the Examination and Death of . . . Sir John Oldcastle.* Antwerp, 1544.

Cavendish, George. *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey.* 1556–58. *Two Early Tudor Lives*. Ed. Richard S. Sylvester and Davis P. Harding. New Haven: Yale UP, 1962. 3–193.

Cockburn, J. S. "The Nature and Incidence of Crime in England, 1559–1625: A Preliminary Survey." *Crime in England, 1550–1800*. Ed. Cockburn. London: Methuen, 1977. 62–63.

Cooper, Thomas. *Cooper's Chronicle, . . . from the Beginning of King Henry the Eighth's Reign unto the Late Death of Queen Mary*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1560.

Duffy, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.

Fish, Simon. *A Supplication for the Beggars*. C. 1529. Ed. Frederick J. Furnivall. London: Early English Text Soc., 1871.

Flood, John L. "The Winchester Geese." Rev. of *Syphilis in Shakespeare's England*, by Johannes Fabricius. *Times Literary Supplement* 13 Jan. 1995: 12.

Giamatti, A. Bartlett. "Hippolytus among the Exiles." *Exile and Change in Renaissance Literature*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1984. 12–32.

Grafton, Richard. *An Abridgement of the Chronicles of England*. London: Richard Tottle, 1563.

Gransden, Antonia. *Historical Writing in England, c. 1307 to the Early Sixteenth Century*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.

Hall, Edward. *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Families of Lancaster and York*. London: Richard Grafton, 1548.

Harman, Thomas. *A Caveat for Common Cursetors, Vulgarly Called Vagabonds*. 1566. London: W. Griffith, 1567. 2nd ed. London: H. Middleton, 1573.

Helgerson, Richard. *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.

Holinshed, Raphael. *The Chronicles of England*. 2 vols. London: Denham, 1587.

Kastan, David Scott. "Opening Gates and Stopping Hedges: Grafton, Stow, and the Politics of Elizabethan History Writing." *The Project of Prose in Early Modern Europe and the New World*. Ed. Elizabeth Fowler and Roland Greene. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 66–79.

Manning, Roger B. *Village Revolts: Social Protest and Popular Disturbances in England, 1509–1640*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.

More, Thomas. *The History of King Richard III*. 1543. *Richard III: The Great Debate*. Ed. Paul Murray Kendall. New York: Norton, 1965. 31–112.

Palliser, David M. *The Age of Elizabeth: England under the Later Tudors, 1547–1603*. London: Longman, 1983.

Patterson, Annabel. *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994.

Shakespeare, William. *Complete Works*. Ed. David Bevington. 4th ed. Glenview: Scott, 1992.

Stow, John. *A Survey of London*. London: John Windet, 1599.

Thomas, Keith. "A Vanished World." Rev. of *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*, by Eamon Duffy. *New York Review of Books* 7 Nov. 2002: 56–59.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081203X47868 Published online by Cambridge University Press